9TH EDITION

SOCIOLOGY

ANTHONY GIDDENS
AND PHILIP W. SUTTON

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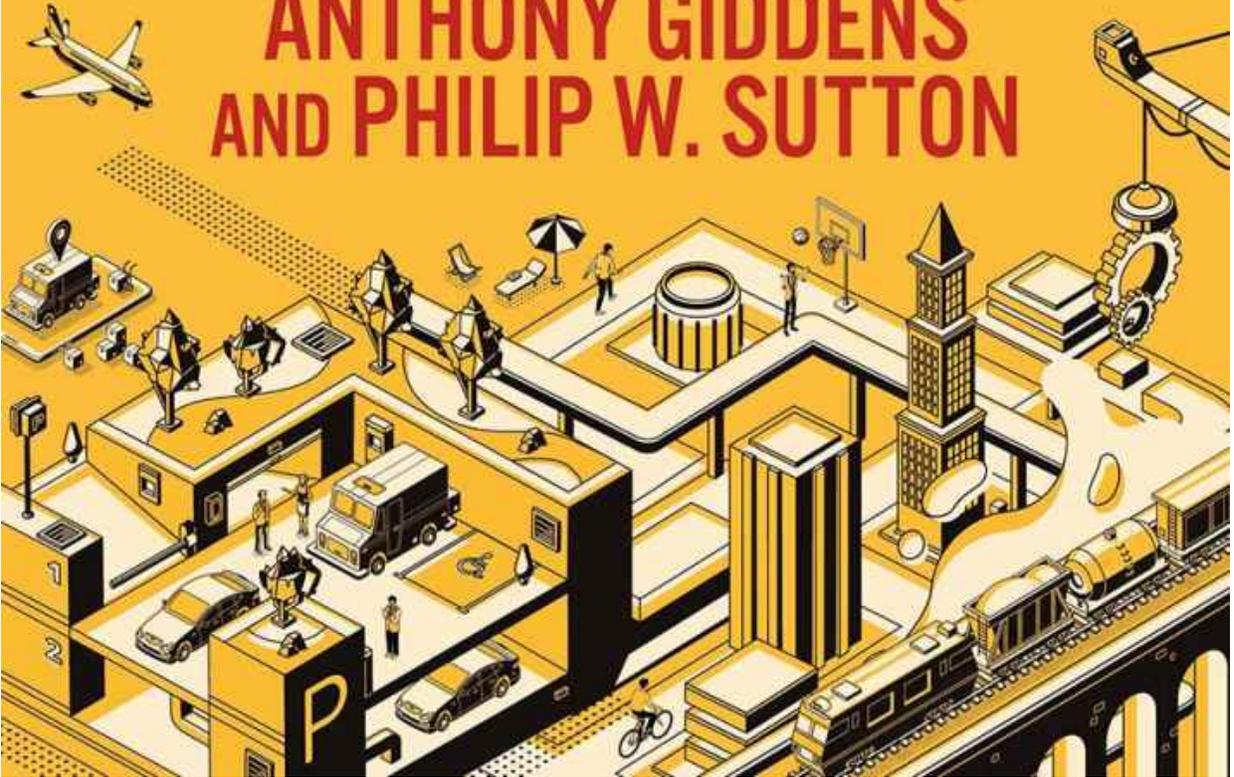
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Preface to the Ninth Edition

This ninth edition of *Sociology* is unique – the first to be finalized while the world is in the midst of a global health pandemic, as we write this Preface in late-November 2020. Many countries, including the UK, still have an unprecedented number of restrictions in place as governments try to control the spread of a novel coronavirus and the disease it causes, labelled as Covid-19. We hope that, at the time you read this, the worst of the pandemic has passed and something approaching 'normal life' has returned. No doubt sociologists and many others will already be making their contribution to learning the lessons from this globally disruptive crisis.

The rapid spread of Covid-19 across the world is an illustration of the global interconnectedness of the human world. Before the pandemic there were, on average, 176,000 flights every day carrying more than 4 billion people per year to every continent on Earth, for business, work, migration, tourism and family visits. There is no global government, but today's world certainly feels smaller and more accessible, and it is increasingly experienced as one single human community. The optimistic advice to all new graduates, 'the world's your oyster', becomes more accurate every year.

Yet such fabulous opportunities do not come risk-free. The aviation industry contributes to global warming and uses huge amounts of non-sustainable fossil fuels at a time when global warming is widely accepted as the most serious threat to the long-term future of human societies. How do we balance the opportunities and risks inherent in our love of and need for international travel? Aviation is just one example of the 'high-risk, high-opportunity' world that human beings have created. Similarly, we are in the midst of an ongoing digital revolution that connects people together systematically and continuously, offering unprecedented opportunities for communication and networking. But, at the same time, the digital environment brings new possibilities for tracking, surveillance and data gathering that states and corporations use to delve ever deeper into the lives and

lifestyles of individuals. Should we accept that forfeiting privacy is necessary in order to reap the benefits of the digital age? Sociological research and theorizing can help us all to think through these questions.

Sociology demands that we learn to set aside our personal beliefs and opinions during our work. In this way, learning how to 'think sociologically' is a profound intellectual and emotional challenge that can be unsettling, though most students and professional sociologists say they have been changed, for the better, by the experience. The discipline also forces us to look beyond the immediate context of our individual lives to see our society in a new light, as we reach a deeper understanding of the causes and consequences of our own, and other people's, actions. It also takes us into the ways of life in very different societies, broadening our understanding of the human experience around the world. We invite you to take the first steps on that journey.

Acknowledgements

Introduction

As the academic discipline which studies and tries to make sense of societies and social life, sociology cannot stand still. It must move with society if it is to be relevant to contemporary issues and concerns. Failure to do so would lead to a reliance on outdated and inadequate accounts of the social world. One of our tasks is to provide explanations and frameworks that help everyone to understand the world they are helping to shape. This means that sociologists are always testing their cherished theories and perspectives against the evidence collected in research studies. If we find our theories are wanting, then we have to be prepared to modify them or, as often happens, devise new, more adequate ones. This helps to explain why theories in our discipline seem to change so often.

The ninth edition of *Sociology* has the same aim as the previous eight, namely to inspire a new generation of sociologists by introducing some of the most exciting research from across the discipline, from the environment, work, inequalities, and the media to war, health and gender issues. As ever, we have tried to avoid abstract discussion and the disciplinary jargon that we know readers find unnecessary. On the other hand, as a scientific subject, sociology does have its own technical language with which students need to become comfortable, and we aim to introduce this carefully and in accessible ways.

The chapters follow a sequence designed to help readers achieve a progressive mastery of the different fields of sociology, but there is also much cross-referencing, so chapters can be tackled as required. We also illustrate ideas, concepts and theories using real-world examples taken mainly from sociological studies. The combination of theory and evidence is, after all, one of the hallmarks of good sociology. Findings drawn from the cutting edge of the discipline are presented alongside contemporary events, issues and data, and we try hard to cover these in an even-handed, though not indiscriminate, way.

Sociology has a central place within the social sciences and a key role in modern intellectual life. Underpinning this book is our shared vision

that a general sociological approach is still the best way of setting our personal life experience into a broader context, so we are better able to make sense of the connections between individuals and society.

Four central themes

The book consists of twenty-two chapters, and each deals with a specific field of study, but there are some key issues across the whole book. We have identified four themes – globalization, social inequality, the digital revolution and identity – that are significant in many areas of sociology today.

Globalization

The concept of globalization has become common currency today, and chapter 4 covers the subject in detail. Some have argued that the process of closer global integration has stalled or even gone into reverse, as evidenced by the increasing popularity of nationalism in the political sphere. Our assessment is that this is not correct. The globalization of social life has, of course, prompted opposition from several directions, while the supposed benefits of globalization have clearly not been favourable for everyone. But our view is that the balance of the evidence shows that the globalizing of human affairs continues, systematically binding the world's societies more closely together, regardless of what we may think about it.

The 2008 financial crash and the 2019–20 Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that we all share a global economic system and global transport infrastructure that link national economies together and facilitate the mass movement of people around the world. The globalization of social life is one clear illustration of the need for sociologists to maintain a focus on worldwide social, economic and political change.

Globalization in the ninth edition

It is not possible to cover every impact of globalization in one single chapter, chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change', but a quick reference guide to global issues and globalization will help to direct readers to relevant chapters:

Chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?' – introduction to globalization in sociology and the illustrative example of coffee

Chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives' – colonialism and its legacy, postcolonial theory and decolonizing sociology, cosmopolitanism and citizenship

Chapter 5, 'The Environment' – the global risk society, global warming, globalization of ecological modernization

Chapter 6, 'Global Inequality' – global inequality throughout, discourses and models of global inequality, global wealth distribution, unequal life chances in the Global South/North, global demographic trends, development theory and post-development critiques

Chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality' – global human trafficking and sex tourism, the global gender order, feminist movements and theories in the Global North/South, LGBTQ+ rights around the world

Chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration' – the global 'age of migration', colonialism and the slave trade, global diasporas

Chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class' – modern slavery, globalization and stratification systems

Chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability' – disability in a global context, globalization and health pandemics

Chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare' – the precariat as a 'global class' in the making, welfare state reform under globalization

Chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life' – global cities within globalization, global gentrification, urban development in the Global

South

Social inequality

Our second theme is social inequality, a founding issue of sociology from its origins in the nineteenth century. Can this really still be a key theme today? The simple answer is, yes. Inequality, both within a single society and between diff erent societies, is just as significant today as it was in the past, and in some ways even more so. Despite the fabulous productive capacity and wealth that exist today, the distribution of rewards remains grossly unequal. Some recent research finds that,

globally, the world's wealth has accumulated disproportionately in the hands of a tiny proportion of the global population. , 'Global Inequality', deals with this issue most directly, though numerous others also cover the issue. Economic inequality is just one form of inequality recognized by sociologists today. Race and ethnicity, gender, sexuality, disability and age-related inequality are all discussed at various points in the book. Many studies today have found that apparently discrete forms of inequality are, in fact, interrelated, producing a diverse set of individual life experiences. Sociologists now routinely look to explore the ways in which these major social inequalities 'intersect'.

Social inequality in the ninth edition

The issue of social inequality has been and remains so fundamental to sociological studies that it may legitimately be said to infuse all of its specialist fields. For this book, that means every chapter contains some discussion of inequalities. However, some of these are more systematic and focused than others, and these sections are listed below:

Chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?' – Karl Marx on class-based inequality, conflict theory in sociology and an introduction to feminist theories of gender inequality

Chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives' – Marx versus Weber on social class, introduction to intersectional analysis of inequalities

Chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change' – inequalities of historical societies, discussion of the terminology used to discuss global inequalities, Wallerstein on inequality in the world system

Chapter 5, 'The Environment' – environmental justice campaigns, environmental racism, global warming and inequality, the social class base of environmental politics

Chapter 6, 'Global Inequality' – all aspects of global inequality, focusing on the Global South

Chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality' – gender inequality in detail, theories of gender inequality, intersectional analysis, LGBTQ+ civil rights

Chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration' – inequalities of race and ethnicity throughout, theories of racial inequality, intersectional studies of race and ethnicity

Chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class' – stratification and social inequalities throughout

Chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability' – health inequalities, class, race and ethnicity, disability and health

The starkest form of global inequality is between the countries of the Global South and those of the Global North, which owes much to the damaging legacy of colonialism. There is a significant movement, known as postcolonialism, which looks to understand the many ways in which European colonialism helped to shape the pattern of global inequality, and studies from this movement are also represented across the book.

The digital revolution

The third theme is the digital revolution, which has facilitated global connectivity and transformed almost every aspect of the way we live, work and enjoy our leisure time. Younger 'digital' generations take for granted the opportunities for communication that were, often literally, science fiction fantasy to their parents and grandparents. The internet, worldwide web, social media, smartphones, robotics, artificial intelligence, and much more are reshaping our world. Relentless

microprocessing development makes personal computers so powerful that each one has more computing power than that available to entire corporations just thirty-five years ago.

Artificial intelligence (AI), robotics and the use of 'big data' are also gathering pace, enabling the emerging 'Internet of Things': smart devices with multiple functions, made possible by superfast Wi-Fi. We are entering a world of entirely automated factories, driverless cars, deliveries by remoteoperated drone, domestic robots and automated systems in the home, AI-generated media content, and much more. What will be the impact on work when tasks and even whole jobs can be performed without human beings? The most basic question, 'how can we make a living?', is raised anew once factory workers, taxi drivers, journalists and doctors all see part, or all, of their role taken from them. We may still be at the foothills of the digital revolution, but the book covers its potentially profound consequences for every individual and all societies.

The digital revolution in the ninth edition

The digital revolution increasingly influences every aspect of our lives. As such, the presence of digital communications and devices, artificial intelligence, robotics, big data analysis, intensified surveillance and digital inequalities within the book is larger than ever before. The main discussions of these subjects are as follows:

Chapter 2, 'Asking and Answering Sociological Questions' – the new field of digital sociology

Chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change' – the development of digital infrastructure, digital technology's role in globalization, social media use in Kuwait

Chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability' – new health technologies, pandemics and big data analysis

Chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life' – social media and online interactions, cyberbullying, integration of digital devices in everyday life, online interaction norms and 'netiquette'

Chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life' – digitally smart cities, digital technology in the shift to sustainable cities

Chapter 16, 'Education' – the digitization of learning, digital classrooms, the digital divide in education

Chapter 17, 'Work and Employment' – digitization and the knowledge economy, digital technology and the 'end of work', platform capitalism and the gig economy

Chapter 19, 'The Media' – the digital revolution and its impact on television, music, newspapers and other media, social media and fake news, digital divides and inequality, digital media and censorship, participatory cultures

Chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements' – social movement organizations and social media, Castells on networked social movements

Identity

Our fourth theme is [identity](#), a concept that connects the individual's experience to their wider social context. To talk about identity means considering the questions 'who am I?', 'who are you?' and 'does my view of you match your own view of your identity?' Does our personal identity change over time, and, if so, how? For sociologists, our starting point is that individual or 'personal' identities are not biologically given but socially created in social interactions. The mundane, but thoroughly revolutionary conclusion is that, in spite of everything we may feel and no matter how strongly we feel it, our identity is, in highly significant ways, shaped by other people. All identities are social identities.

There are many sources from which our identities are constructed: nationality, ethnicity, social class, gender, occupation, political affiliation, religion, sexuality, musical taste and lots more. We may find that, at different times, one of these seems to define our real, 'authentic' identity more than all others. Yet, if that perception shifts, has our identity then changed? Sociological studies show that questions of identity have become more significant today than in the past, and the book contains many discussions of the subject.

Identity in the ninth edition

Understanding the increasing significance of personal and social identity construction has become an important part of sociological analysis. As globalization and the digital revolution continue to progress and deepen, their impact on socialization processes and identities also increases. The main discussions of identity are as follows:

Chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives' – the social self and identity, theories of identity formation

Chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change' – globalization's impact on national identity, glocalization, modernity and reflexive individualism

Chapter 5, 'The Environment' – risk and identity, theories of the ecological self

Chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality' – theories of gender identity, sexual identities, gender fluidity and transgender identities, masculinity/femininity and identity

Chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration' – ethnicity and identity, black identity and 'new' ethnicities, intersectionality and ethnic identities, multiculturalism and multiple sources of identification, diaspora and identity

Chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class' – intersecting inequalities and forms of identity, class-based identity, consumer lifestyles and identities, disidentifying with the working class

Chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability' – eating disorders and personal identity, illness and the changing perception of self-identity, disability and identities

Chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life' – sociological theories of identity, embodiment and personal identity, theories of gender identity, identities in online environments

The main elements of our approach

There are three recurring features in our broad approach to sociology in the book. First, we look to connect small-scale, micro-level social encounters with the large-scale, macro level of social institutions and societies. Individual interactions can have an impact on the larger world of social institutions, but the latter also influence our daily lives in very profound ways. This is a two-way interchange and lies at the heart of many social processes. It is our view that comprehensive sociological analysis requires situations and events to be understood at both the micro and the macro level.

Second, the book adopts a comparative-historical standpoint. In our global age, sociology must investigate the relationships between a range of societies and the varied ways in which they influence one another. A wide variety of source material is introduced that is drawn from many societies around the world. In particular, most chapters cover societies in both the Global South and the Global North, which makes for a more comprehensive understanding. In our view, comparative, historical sociology is essential if we are to understand today's globalizing social world.

Third, we continually seek to connect the social with the personal. In this sense we take a lead from the American sociologist C. Wright Mills, who said that sociology connects the study of personal troubles, such as losing a job or getting divorced, with wider social issues, such as economic restructuring and shifting gender relations. The task of sociologists is to connect people's personal experience to patterns of social change in order to arrive at a better understanding.

Studying sociology can be a liberating experience that opens up our imagination, bringing new ideas and perspectives to bear, creating an awareness of areas of social life and cultures that are very different from our own. Sociology can also force us to see familiar aspects of life in new ways that challenge our firmly held opinions. This is the starting point for developing a sociological way of thinking, or what sociologists call a sociological imagination.

Interactive features

The ninth edition adopts interactive features designed to engage readers actively with the text. ***Classic studies*** boxes introduce some of sociology's most influential pieces of work, but be aware that 'classic' is not just another word for 'old'. Sociology makes progress by constantly testing ideas, theories and methods in the thousands of research projects, journal articles and books that constitute academic sociology. Of course, the majority of research studies never achieve the status of 'classics', but this does not mean they have no value. However, sometimes significant new discoveries are made, a novel research method is devised, or a new theory exerts a major influence on the direction of the discipline. In these cases they may be recognized by professional sociologists as 'classics'. Hence, a 'classic' can be any age, and our selections in the book reflect this. Not everyone will agree with all of our choices, but they are not purely random, personal choices. We have tested them on numerous anonymous reviewers, lecturers and readers, which reassures us that they are widely acknowledged as significant.

There are several other interactive elements throughout the book. ***Thinking critically*** boxes mark 'stopping off' points, where readers can reflect and think through the significance of what they have learned. We strongly recommend working through these boxes to get the most from the book. ***Global society*** boxes encourage students to think globally about even the most apparently local or domestic issues. Boxes labelled ***Using your sociological imagination*** often contain unusual or arresting material designed to illustrate or expand on themes found in the chapter. The ***Glossary*** continues to expand as sociologists devise new concepts that pass into common currency. All glossary terms are highlighted in bold within chapters for easy reference.

The 'sociological workshops' at the end of each chapter have proved useful for teaching and learning and have been updated again this time. The ***Chapter review*** asks questions based on chapter material, and it is a good idea to work through these immediately after reading, though they may also be the basis for revision at a later date. ***Research in***

practice concentrates on research methods and their application in real-world studies. Here, we point readers to a piece of contemporary research, usually a journal article, and ask them to track it down, read it and make notes as they do so. A series of questions then allows readers to think about the different types of research and methods, what they are used for and how successful they have been. An understanding of research methods is essential for the practice of 'doing' sociology.

Thinking it through exercises select a theoretical paper, an online discussion or a newspaper article which raises issues of theory and explanation. Part of the activity is to make sure readers understand the concepts used and the meaning of the paper. A fair number of students tell us they find 'theory' difficult to grasp, mainly because it seems abstract and distant from their own lives. We have therefore selected theoretical pieces which bear directly on real events to bridge the apparent divide between theory and daily life.

Society in the arts takes us outside academic social science, into the arts and humanities. In this section we suggest films, TV programmes or plays, novels, artworks or sculptures, music and exhibitions. All of our recommendations are closely linked to the chapter material, and we ask readers to consider how they add to their knowledge of society. What is special about the arts? How is *contemporary* social life represented in the arts? Do the arts tell us something different about the world that the social sciences never could? We encourage readers to consider such questions carefully in the exercises here.

Finally, the *Further readings* have been updated and briefly annotated, so readers can make a more informed choice about what they choose to read. Similarly, *Internet links* have been checked and updated, so readers can explore some of the material now available online. The book also has its own website – **www.politybooks.com/giddens9** – which has resources for further research and in support of teaching and learning.

CHAPTER 1

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

CONTENTS

As the Covid-19 pandemic spread around the world in 2020, many national governments closed their borders or imposed entry restrictions. This had a dramatic effect on global aviation. A majority of the world's aircraft were grounded and many of the best-known airlines effectively closed down. Flying is one of the more visible examples of globalization and the fabulous opportunities it offers, but the aviation industry also helped to spread the virus and its health risks rapidly across the globe. This example illustrates something of the character of today's high-opportunity, high-risk world.

Today's social world offers exciting opportunities for travel, work and leisure that heighten perceptions of individual freedom and choice. Yet, at the same time, many people have anxieties and concerns about the risks inherent in our modern way of life. With widespread use of the internet and social media, communicating and maintaining contact across continents is more immediate and routine than ever before, but there are also violent crime, global terrorism, national conflicts and wars, along with persistent economic and social inequalities. The modern world has many opportunities and possibilities but it is also fraught with high-consequence risks such as global pandemics, rising air pollution, climate change, and the threat posed by nuclear and chemical weapons. We live in 'high-risk, high reward' societies which

appear to fluctuate wildly between extremes without any overall authority or control.

Most people within the relatively rich nations of the Global North are materially better off than ever before, but in other parts of the world, notably the Global South, many millions live in poverty where children die for the lack of fundamental necessities such as nutritious food, safe water and basic healthcare. How can this be, when humanity as a whole has the capability to control its own destiny to an extent that would have been unimaginable to previous generations? How did this world come about? Why is the human world riven with huge inequalities of wealth and income? Where are today's societies heading in the future? These large questions are among the central concerns of sociology, a field of study that has a fundamental role to play in modern life.

Sociology can be simply defined as the scientific study of social groups, whole societies and the human world as such. The scope of sociology is extremely broad, ranging from the analysis of passing encounters between individuals in the street to changes in family life, new forms of personal and social identity, and relationships between nation-states. Most of us see the world in terms of the familiar features of our own lives – our families, friendships and working lives, for example. Sociology insists that we take a broader and longer view in order to understand why we act in the ways we do. It teaches us that much of what appears to us as natural, inevitable, good and true may not be so, and that things we take for granted are shaped by historical events and social processes. Understanding the quite subtle but complex and profound ways in which our individual lives reflect the contexts of our social experience is fundamental to the sociologist's way of seeing.

An introduction to sociology

This chapter is the first of a block of three which, taken together, provide a broad introduction to the discipline of sociology: what it is, how it developed over time, how sociologists go about their work, and what kinds of explanations they use. It provides a brief introduction to what sociology is, how and why it came into existence and what it is used for. Chapter 2 then looks at the practice of sociology: how sociologists actually study their subject. It describes the questions they ask, the wide range of research methods they use to address those questions, and how they evaluate their findings. It also tackles the thorny issue of whether sociology can or should be considered 'scientific'.

Chapter 3 looks at sociological theories. Theories are an essential part of all scientific subjects because they provide explanations rather than descriptions that simply list relevant facts. For example, we might find that the proportion of married women in Australia who are in work today is higher than it was in the 1950s. Such bald statistics are certainly useful, but they are crying out for an explanation – *why* are more married women working today than in the past? Good theories provide explanations. They tell us *why* something has happened or changed and in that way they broaden our knowledge. In chapter 3 we introduce some important sociological theories including Marxism, feminism, functionalism, structuration theory, postcolonialism, postmodernism and more. You should not be put off by these labels, which are just shorthand ways of describing different groups of sociologists who interpret and aim to understand the social world.

In the rest of this chapter we first discuss sociology as *a way of thinking* about the world which, once you have mastered it, becomes very difficult to avoid. In short, once a sociologist, always a sociologist! World events, political debates, personal relationships, family life: you will see all of these and many more in a different light once you have developed a sociological way of seeing and thinking.

Second, we introduce the ideas of some of the sociological thinkers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who established the subject as an academic discipline. We connect these thinkers to the times they lived through to illustrate the emerging social problems they tried to solve and how they went about it. We then discuss some of the approaches to sociology that came afterwards. However, this is not a comprehensive list, and you will need to read [chapter 3](#), on 'Theories and Perspectives', for more recent theories.

Third, we look at some of the uses of sociology. Many students are attracted to sociology because they have a desire to help others and want a suitable 'people-centred' career. Some sociology graduates find careers in the caring professions, social work, teaching or the criminal justice system. Others use their research skills and knowledge to good effect in business management, market research, local and national government administration or research consultancy. Still others (after more study) become professional sociologists themselves working in universities and colleges. While studying sociology can be the first step on the path to a rewarding and satisfying career, some individuals study sociology simply because they want to understand better the world we live in. This is sociology as personal enlightenment relatively unconnected to a specific career path.

Some sociologists use their training and skills in very practical ways to try and improve the conditions of life for people by intervening to change an existing situation. This branch of the discipline is known as 'applied sociology', where many studies of homelessness, poverty, unemployment, drug addiction, self-harm, and so on, lead to interventions. Based on their research findings, applied researchers may try out potential solutions on a small scale or make recommendations for changes to government policy or service provision.

The chapter ends with recent ideas of the need for sociologists to engage more with the general public and the media if sociology is to have a greater impact on society. We have become used to seeing psychologists, historians and political scientists as experts on radio, on television news and in documentaries, but rarely do we see sociologists. This section discusses why this is so and what sociologists can and

should do about it. However, we begin by outlining what it means to 'think sociologically' – a basic prerequisite to the practice of 'doing sociology'.

The sociological imagination

Studying sociology is not just a routine process of acquiring knowledge from books like this one. Learning to think sociologically means cultivating our imagination in a specific way. The sociologist must be able to break free from the immediacy of their own personal circumstances to see things in a wider social context. Practising sociology depends on developing what the American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1970), in a famous phrase, called a sociological imagination.

The sociological imagination demands that we 'think ourselves away' from the familiar routines of our daily life in order that we may look at them from a new point of view which may appear strange, at least at first. The best way to illustrate this is with something so ordinary it usually passes without comment: the act of drinking a cup of coffee. What could sociology possibly find to say about such a commonplace and uninteresting act?

First, coffee may be a pleasant drink, but it also has symbolic value as part of our day-to-day social activity, and the rituals associated with coffee drinking can be more significant than consuming the actual drink. For many people, a cup of coffee in the morning is the centrepiece of a personal routine and an essential start to the day. Morning coffee is then followed later in the day by coffee with others – the basis of a group, not just an individual ritual. People who arrange to meet for coffee are probably more interested in socializing and chatting than drinking, and, in all societies, drinking and eating provide occasions for social interaction – a rich subject matter for sociologists to study.

Second, coffee contains caffeine, a drug which has a stimulating effect on the brain. Many people drink coffee for the 'extra lift' this active substance provides. Long days at the office or late nights studying in the library are made more tolerable by regular coffee breaks. And though coffee is a habit-forming substance, coffee 'addicts' are not regarded as drug users. This is because, like alcohol, caffeine is a socially acceptable

and legal drug, whereas cocaine and heroin, for example, are not. Yet some societies tolerate the consumption of cocaine but frown on both coffee and alcohol. Sociologists are interested in why these differences exist, how they developed and whether they are changing.

Meeting friends for coffee retains its place as part of a widespread social ritual. Yet today's specialist coffee shops cater to younger consumers, offering a much wider range of caffeine drinks in fashionable environments that look and feel closer to bars and nightclubs than traditional cafés and teashops.

Third, when we drink a cup of coffee we are unwittingly caught up in a complex set of social and economic relationships stretching right across the planet. Coffee links people in the wealthiest and the most impoverished parts of the world, as it is consumed mainly in the relatively rich countries but grown primarily in relatively poor ones. Around 125 million workers depend on the coffee trade to earn a living (Fairtrade Foundation 2020), but many labourers are poorly paid and live in poverty. Around half of coffee workers in Brazil have no formal contract of employment, and inspectors have found that many workers earn less than the legal minimum. Most workers are paid around R$14

(US$3.43) per 60 litre sack they pick, which can take a whole day's labour for some women (Teixeira 2019). Some of the largest coffee companies, including Nestlé, Jacobs Douwe Egberts and Starbucks, have admitted that some of their coffee beans have been sourced from Brazilian plantations that use child and slave labour (Hodal 2016; Canning 2019).

Coffee is one of the most traded agricultural commodities globally, providing many countries in South and Central America, Mexico, Africa, Asia and Oceania with their largest source of foreign exchange (ICO 2018). The production, transportation and distribution of coffee require continual transactions between people thousands of miles away from the individual coffee drinker. Studying such global connections is an important task for sociologists.

Fourth, sipping coffee is not a 'natural' act but presumes a long process of social, political and economic development. Along with other familiar items of Western diets – such as tea, bananas, potatoes and white sugar – coffee became widely consumed only from the late 1800s, though it was fashionable among social elites well before then. The drink originated in the Middle East, but mass consumption dates from the period of Western colonial expansion more than 200 years ago. Virtually all the coffee we drink today comes from areas such as South America and Africa that were colonized by Europeans. The drink is not a 'natural' part of the Western diet, however normal buying and consuming coffee appears to people today.

Finally, coffee has been 'branded' and politicized within debates about international fair trade, human rights and environmental damage. For instance, some people drink only organic coffee, decaffeinated coffee or coffee that is 'fairly traded' through schemes that pay the full market price to small producers in developing countries. Others patronize 'independent' coffee houses rather than 'corporate' chains such as Starbucks and Costa. Choosing a coffee is not only a lifestyle decision, it also has political significance.

When we begin to develop a sociological imagination, the morning coffee becomes a thing of great fascination which we approach with a new understanding. Indeed, as we will see throughout the book, the

best sociological studies always tell us something we did not know before or make us see the familiar routines and patterns of life in new ways.

Coffee is much more than a pleasant drink for these workers, whose livelihoods depend on the coffee plant.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Take a jar of coffee from your home or workplace and search the company website for information on where its coffee plants are grown, what the production process entails and how many workers are involved. What social, economic or political factors would make you or your friends reconsider your coffee choices?

Studying people and societies

It is often said that sociology is simply the 'science of society'. But what do we mean by 'society'? When sociologists speak of a society, they generally mean a group of people living in a bounded territory who share common cultural features such as language, values and basic norms of behaviour. Hence we can discuss South Korean society, Nigerian society or Spanish society. However, 'society' also includes institutions – such as particular types of government, education systems and family forms – and the relatively stable relationships between them. The enduring patterns formed by relationships among people, groups and institutions form the basic social structure of a society. When we start thinking about social life through the concepts of society, institutions and social structures, we are beginning to use a sociological imagination and to 'think sociologically'.

Adopting a sociological imagination allows us to see that events that affect the individual person actually reflect larger social issues. Divorce, for instance, may be emotionally traumatic for individuals who go through it – what Mills calls a 'personal trouble'. But the level of divorce is also a significant 'public issue' that has an impact on pension provision, welfare benefits and housing needs. Similarly, losing a job and being unable to find another one quickly may be a personal tragedy for the individual, but it is far more than a matter of private despair when millions of people find themselves in the same situation. It is a public issue expressing broad economic and social trends.

Try to apply a sociological imagination to your own life. It is not necessary to think only of troubling events. Consider why you are turning the pages of this book – why did you decide to study sociology? You could be a reluctant student (surely not?) taking a course to fulfil the degree requirement for a career in law, teaching, journalism or management. Or you might just be enthusiastic to understand better the world you live in. Whatever your motivation, you are likely to have a good deal in common with other sociology students. This is because your private decision also reflects your location within the wider society.

Do any of the following characteristics apply to you? Are you young and white? From a professional or white-collar background? Have you done, or do you still do, some part-time work to boost your income? Do you want to find a good job but are not especially dedicated to studying? More than three-quarters of readers in the UK will answer 'yes' to all of these questions, because university students are not typical of the general population; they tend to be drawn from more privileged social groups and their attitudes reflect those of their friends and acquaintances. Our social background has a great deal to do with the lifestyle choices we make.

On the other hand, none of the characteristics above may apply to you. You might come from a minority ethnic group, from a working-class family or from a background of relative poverty. You may be in mid-life or older. All the same, we can make some tentative assumptions about you. You are likely to have had to struggle to get where you are; you probably had to overcome negative reactions from friends who thought you were quite mad to give up a decent job, take on a large debt or risk failing, and you may well be combining your studies with full-time parenthood. For sociologists there is no such thing as the 'isolated individual' who makes choices without reference to anyone else.

We are all influenced by social contexts, but our behaviour is never determined entirely by that context. Sociology investigates the connections between what society makes of us and what we make of society and ourselves. Our activities both structure – or give shape to – the social world around us and, at the same time, are structured by that world. The social contexts of our lives are not a mass of completely random events but are structured, or patterned, in distinct ways. There are certain regularities in the ways we behave and in the relationships we have with one another.

Although the idea of a 'structure' reminds us of a building, social structures are not really like physical structures, which, once built, exist independently of our actions. Human societies are always in the process of structuration (Giddens 1984). That is, they are reconstructed at every moment by the very 'building blocks' that compose them – human beings like us. Consider again the case of coffee. A cup of coffee does not drop into your hands. You *choose* to go to a particular coffee

shop, you *choose* whether to drink a latte, a cappuccino or an espresso. As you make those decisions, along with millions of other people, you help to shape the world market for coffee, and that affects the lives of coffee producers in distant countries whom you will never meet.

In recent decades, the malleable character of social structures has been dramatically demonstrated. The communist regimes of Eastern Europe, including the former Soviet Union, collapsed rapidly in the late 1980s and the 1990s as ordinary people took to the streets to protest at the lack of freedom and economic development. No one foresaw that the apparently solid and unyielding social structures of communism would wilt as people withdrew their legitimacy from the regimes and their leaders. In 2011, countries of the Middle East and North Africa saw numerous uprisings against authoritarian governments in the region as people expressed their dissatisfaction and called for change. In Libya, the 42-year regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi was ended and, in Egypt, President Hosni Mubarak was forced from office after protesters took over Tahrir Square in the capital city, Cairo. Events such as these, even though not always successful, show us that social structures are always 'in process', however solid or 'natural' they may feel.

Recent political developments, including those noted here, are further discussed in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', and chapter 21, 'Nations, War and Terrorism'.

The development of sociological thinking

Many students find sociological theory difficult, not least because they do not understand why the subject has so many different theories. Sociology has never been a discipline where a single body of ideas is accepted as valid by everyone. Sociologists often disagree about how to study human behaviour and how research findings should be interpreted. This is quite normal and is an aspect of all scientific subjects. However, unlike physics or chemistry, sociology involves studying ourselves, and this can severely challenge long-held views and attitudes. Sociology can be unsettling and disturbing. Nonetheless, we must make every effort to set aside our emotional and political commitments, at least while we are in the process of 'doing sociology'. If we do not, then there is a risk that we will be misled and that our conclusions will not be valid.

Theories and theoretical perspectives

It is a fact that I bought a cup of coffee this morning, that it cost a certain amount of money and that the coffee beans used to make it were grown in Brazil. But in sociology we also want to know *why* things happen, and that means we have to construct theories which explain the bare facts. We know that many millions of people use the internet and social media to stay in touch with friends. But this is a very recent development which raises some questions. Why did internet use spread so rapidly? How did online social media come about and why do so many people get involved with them? Why are younger people more likely to use social media than older people? What impact are social media sites having on earlier forms of communication? To address questions such as these, we need to collect and assemble the evidence and engage in theorizing.

In this painting by Bruegel, random, often bizarre activities can be seen which collectively make little sense. The title – *Netherlandish Proverbs* – provides the key to interpreting the painting, which contains over a hundred proverbs that were common in the sixteenth century. For example, at the bottom left someone is 'banging their head against a brick wall', on which sits a man who is 'armed to the teeth'. Evidence collected by sociologists can appear similarly random unless it is set within a general theory which guides our interpretation of the facts.

Theorizing means constructing abstract interpretations of events using a series of logically related statements that explain a wide variety of empirical or 'factual' situations. A theory about social media, for example, would be concerned with identifying how information and communications technology (ICT or just IT) has developed over time and what were the prerequisites for their success. In the best sociology, factual research and explanatory theories are closely related. We can only develop valid theoretical explanations if we can test them through empirical research; sociological theories should not be mere speculation. Contrary to popular belief, the facts do *not* speak for

themselves; they need to be interpreted, and interpretation takes place within a set of underlying theoretical assumptions. Many sociologists work primarily on factual research projects, but unless they are guided by some knowledge of theory their work is unlikely to *explain* satisfactorily the complexity they find. This is true even of research carried out with strictly practical objectives.

Many people see themselves as essentially practical, 'down to earth' folks and are suspicious of theorists and theories which appear far removed from their daily life. Yet all practical decisions make some theoretical assumptions. The manager of a business may have no regard for 'theory', but she might also believe that her employees are motivated by monetary reward and that the promise of this leads them to work hard. This is a simple underlying theoretical interpretation of human behaviour which the manager takes for granted without realizing or acknowledging it. An alternative view is that most people work in order to make a decent life for their families and monetary reward is merely a means to that less individualistic end. Once we begin to look for satisfactory interpretations of human actions we have to become interested in theories.

Without some kind of theoretical approach, we do not even know what to look for when beginning a study or when interpreting our results at the end of the research process. Theoretical thinking must also tackle general problems of how social life can and should be studied in the first place. Should sociological methods be modelled on the natural sciences? How should we think of human consciousness, social action and social institutions? How can sociologists avoid introducing personal bias into their research? Should they even try? There are no easy answers to such questions, which have been answered in different ways since the emergence of sociology in the nineteenth century.

Founders of sociology

For thousands of years, attempts to understand human behaviour relied on ways of thinking passed down from generation to generation. Before the rise of modern sciences, 'folkways' – traditional knowledge and practices passed down through generations – held sway in most

communities, and these persisted well into the twentieth century. One example is people's understanding of their health or illness. Older people, with a good knowledge of a community's folkways, provided advice on how to prevent illness and cure diseases. Reflecting on his American childhood in Lawrence County, Kentucky, Cratis Williams gives us a flavour of the Appalachian culture of the time (Williams 2003: 397–8):

> A plaque of lead suspended on a string around a child's neck warded off colds and kept witches away while the child was sleeping. Children plagued by nightmares could wear these lead charms to assure themselves of sweet sleep and pleasant dreams, for nightmares were caused by witches and evil creatures that could not operate in the presence of lead. Adults given to snoring and nightmares sought relief by smelling a dirty sock as they went to sleep.

Today very few people advocate such measures or hold similar beliefs. Instead, a more scientific approach to health and illness means that children are vaccinated against previously common diseases and taught that nightmares are normal and generally harmless. Pharmacies do not routinely sell smelly socks to cure snoring either. The origins of systematic studies of social life lie in a series of sweeping changes ushered in by the French Revolution of 1789 and the mid-eighteenth-century [Industrial Revolution](#) in Europe. These events shattered older, traditional ways of life, and the founders of sociology sought to understand how such radical changes had come about. But, in doing so, they also developed more systematic, scientific ways of looking at the social and natural worlds which challenged conventional religious beliefs.

The next section looks at the key ideas of some early thinkers, who, until quite recently, went unchallenged as the key 'founders' of sociology. There is no doubt that these early sociologists played an important part in developing a sociological perspective and in establishing sociology as a legitimate academic discipline. However, their focus was on the development of the modern world, what sociologists call *modernity*, insofar as this refers primarily to Europe and North America. Over the last twenty-five years or so, a movement

known as postcolonialism has challenged the accepted account of modernity and the origins of sociology (Bhambra 2014). There are numerous elements in this challenge, which are discussed in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', but two in particular should be borne in mind as you read through the rest of this section.

First, postcolonial scholars argue that sociology has generally not taken enough account of the devastating impact of colonialism on countries in the Global South. Not only did this involve exploitation at the time, but the legacy of colonialism continues to blight these countries long after they achieved independence. Second, the lack of Global South perspectives in the formation and development of sociology led to the discipline adopting a fundamentally Eurocentric position that was, and still is, focused primarily on the industrialized countries of the Global North (Connell 2018). Opening up sociology to more studies by scholars in the Global South is one way in which this situation can begin to be addressed. We have included something of the continuing engagement between sociology and postcolonialism at various points throughout this volume.

The book's chapters also introduce 'classic studies' in specific areas of sociology. These are pieces of research, theories or novel methods that have had a large influence on the subject. However, these are our selections, and there are many more that could have been chosen. Classic studies boxes incorporate a brief critical commentary which points readers towards the limitations of these studies. With these necessary qualifications, we now turn to the established West European founders of sociology.

The process of industrialization is discussed in chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change', and chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life'. Some of the damaging consequences of industrialization are outlined in chapter 5, 'The Environment'.

Auguste Comte

No single individual can found a whole field of study, and there were many contributors to early sociological thinking. However, particular prominence is usually given to Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who invented the word 'sociology' around 1840. Comte had originally used the term 'social physics' to describe the new subject, but some of his intellectual rivals were also using that term. To distinguish his own approach from theirs he coined the term 'sociology' – the systematic study of the social world.

Comte's thinking reflected the turbulent events of his age. He wanted to create a science of society that would discover the 'laws' of the social world, just as natural science had discovered laws in the natural world. He recognized that each scientific discipline has its own subject matter, but Comte thought that a similar logic and scientific method would apply to them all. Uncovering the laws that govern human societies could help us to shape our own destiny and improve the welfare of everyone.

Comte wanted sociology to become a 'positive science' that would use the same rigorous methods as astronomy, physics and chemistry. [Positivism](#) is a doctrine which says that science should be concerned only with observable entities that are known directly to experience. On the basis of careful observation, laws can then be inferred that explain the relationships between those observed phenomena. By understanding the causal relationships between events, scientists can then predict how future events will occur. A positivist approach in sociology aims to produce knowledge about society based on evidence drawn from observation, comparison and experimentation.

Comte argued that human efforts to understand the world have passed through three broad stages: the theological, the metaphysical and the positive. In the theological stage, thinking was guided by religious ideas and a belief that society was an expression of God's will. In the metaphysical stage, society came to be seen in natural rather than supernatural terms, with events being explained by reference to natural laws. The positive stage, ushered in by the discoveries of Copernicus, Galileo and Newton, encouraged the application of scientific methods.

Comte regarded sociology as the last of the sciences to develop, but he argued that it was also the most significant and complex.

In the latter part of his career, Comte was keenly aware of the state of the society in which he lived and was concerned with the inequalities produced by industrialization and the threat they posed to social cohesion. The long-term solution, in his view, was the production of moral consensus through a new 'religion of humanity' to hold society together despite the new patterns of inequality. Although Comte's vision was never realized, his contribution in founding a science of society was important to the later professionalization of sociology as a legitimate academic discipline.

Emile Durkheim

Another French sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), had a more lasting impact on sociology than Comte. Durkheim saw sociology as a new science that turned traditional philosophical questions into sociological ones demanding real-world – empirical – research studies. He argued that we must study social life with the same objectivity as scientists study the natural world, summed up in his famous injunction to 'study social facts as things'. By this he meant that social institutions have a hard, objective reality that enables them to be analysed as rigorously as objects in the natural world.

But what is a social fact? Durkheim explains that social facts are all those institutions and rules of action which constrain or channel human behaviour. For the individual, social facts can feel rather like an external pressure, though most of the time they are simply taken for granted as 'natural' or 'normal' parts of life. For instance, the monetary system is a social fact we rarely think about. We are paid in money, we borrow money from banks to buy a car or a house, and if we have not been good at managing money we will be considered a high risk and may not be allowed to borrow. But the monetary system was already in place before we were born and, as we are forced to use it if we want to take part in our society, we are subject to its rules. In that sense, the system constrains or shapes our actions. This is typical of all social facts; they exist independently of the individual and shape their choices and actions.

In his analysis of suicide rates, Durkheim used the concept of social facts to explain why some countries have higher suicide rates than others (see the 'Classic study' below). Suicide seems to be a purely individual act, the outcome of extreme unhappiness or perhaps deep depression. Yet Durkheim showed that social facts such as religion, marriage, divorce and social class all exert an influence on suicide rates. And, as there are regular patterns across different countries, these patterns must be explained in a sociological not a psychological way.

Durkheim was preoccupied with the changes transforming society in his own lifetime and was particularly interested in social and moral solidarity – what it is that binds society together. Solidarity is maintained when individuals are integrated into social groups and regulated by a set of shared values and customs. In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim (1984 [1893]) argued that the advent of the industrial age also led to a new type of solidarity.

According to Durkheim, older cultures with a low division of labour (specialized roles such as work occupations) are characterized by mechanical solidarity. Most people are involved in similar occupations and bound together by common experiences and shared beliefs. But the development of modern industry and the enlargement of cities produced an expanding division of labour which broke down mechanical forms of solidarity. With the increasing specialization of tasks and roles, a new type of organic solidarity was created. As the division of labour expands, people become increasingly dependent upon one another, because each person needs goods and services that those in other occupations supply. Like the human 'organic' body, each part or organ depends on all the others if the whole society or body is to function properly.

Nonetheless, Durkheim thought that social change in the modern world was so rapid and intense that major difficulties could arise. As societies change, so do lifestyles, morals, beliefs and accepted patterns of behaviour. But, when change is rapid and continuous, the old values lose their grip on people without any new ones becoming established. Durkheim called such an unsettling condition anomie – deep feelings of aimlessness, dread and despair, as many people are left perceiving that their lives lack meaning and structure without clear guidelines for

action. The big question is whether people can ever get used to continuous rapid change as the 'normal' condition of living in conditions of modernity.

Classic studies 1.1 Emile Durkheim's study of suicide

The research problem

One of the more emotionally unsettling aspects of our lives is the phenomenon of suicide, which often leaves those left behind with more questions than answers. Why do some people decide to take their own lives? Where do the pressures they experience actually come from? One of the early sociological classics which explores the relationship between the individual and society is Emile Durkheim's analysis of suicide rates, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Durkheim 1952 [1897]). Even though people see themselves as individuals exercising free will and choice, Durkheim's study showed that even a highly personal act such as suicide is influenced by what happens in the wider social world.

Research had been conducted on suicide before Durkheim's study, but he was the first to insist on a sociological explanation. Previous writers had acknowledged the influence of 'racial type', climate or mental disorder to explain an individual's likelihood of committing suicide. But Durkheim argued that the suicide rate – the percentage of suicides per 100,000 of the population – was a social fact that could only be explained by other social facts and that suicide rates vary widely across the world's societies (see figure 1.1).

By examining official statistics in France, Durkheim found that certain social groups were more likely to commit suicide than others. He discovered that more men committed suicide than women, more Protestants than Catholics, the wealthy more than the poor, and single people more than those who were married. The question was, why?

Durkheim's explanation

These findings led Durkheim to conclude that there are social forces *external to the individual* which influence suicide rates. He related his explanation to the idea of social solidarity and to two types of

bonds within society – social integration and social regulation. Durkheim argued that people who were strongly integrated into social groups, and whose desires and aspirations were regulated by social norms, were less likely to commit suicide. From this he deduced four types of suicide, in accordance with the relative presence or absence of integration and regulation.

1. *Egoistic suicides* are marked by low integration and occur when an individual becomes isolated or when their ties to a social group are weakened or broken. For example, the low rates of suicide among Catholics could be explained by their strong community, while the personal and moral freedom of Protestants meant that they 'stand alone' before God. Marriage protects against suicide by integrating the individual into a stable social relationship, while single people remain more isolated.

2. *Anomic suicide* is caused by a lack of social regulation. By this, Durkheim referred to the condition of *anomie*, when people are rendered 'normless' as a result of rapid change or economic instability. The loss of a fixed point of reference for norms and desires – such as in times of economic upheaval or in personal troubles such as divorce – can upset the balance between people's circumstances and their desires such that they no longer know how to carry on.

3. *Altruistic suicide* occurs when an individual is 'over-integrated' – social bonds are too strong – and comes to value the group more than him- or herself. In such a case, suicide becomes a sacrifice for the 'greater good'. Japanese kamikaze pilots or Islamist suicide bombers are examples. Durkheim saw these as more common in traditional societies where mechanical solidarity prevails.

4. The final type is *fatalistic suicide*. Although Durkheim saw this as of little contemporary relevance, it occurs when an individual is overregulated by society. The oppression of the individual in dictatorial regimes can result in feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.
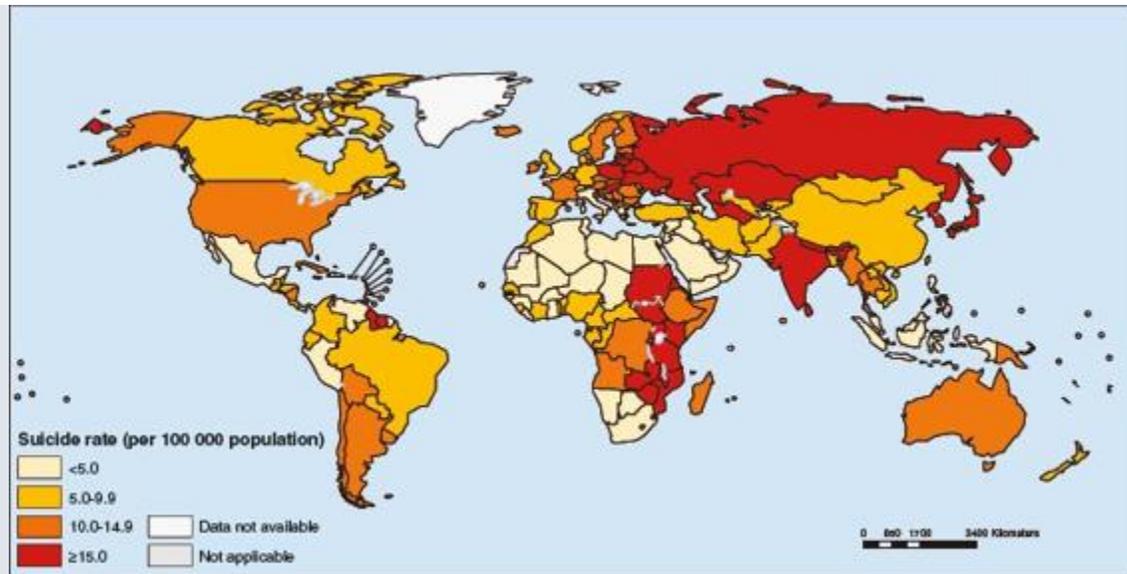
Figure 1.1 Age-standardized suicide rates, both sexes, 2016

Source: WHO (2018a).

Suicide rates vary across societies but are also quite stable *within* particular societies over time. Durkheim took this as evidence that there are consistent social forces that influence suicide rates, and therefore we can see that general social patterns can be detected even within individual actions.

Critical points

Since its publication, many objections have been raised to Durkheim's study, particularly in relation to his uncritical use of official statistics, his dismissal of non-social influences and his insistence in classifying all types of suicide together. Some critics have shown that it is vitally important to understand the social process involved in collecting data on suicides, as coroners' definitions and criteria influence the number of deaths that are recorded as 'suicides' in the first place. Because of this, suicide statistics may be highly variable across societies, as Durkheim suggests, but this is not necessarily because of differences in suicidal behaviour; rather, it is due to divergent practices adopted by coroners in recording 'unexplained deaths'. Suicide statistics may not give us a valid or reliable picture of the extent of suicide in a given society.

Contemporary significance

The arguments of his critics are legitimate, yet Durkheim's study remains a sociological classic. It helped to establish sociology as a discipline with its own subject – the study of social facts – and his fundamental argument retains much of its force: that to grasp fully even the most personal actions of individuals demands a sociological explanation rather than one rooted in the exploration of personal motivation. Durkheim's identification of suicide *rates* as a subject for study is today widely accepted, and the study is also important for its demonstration that social phenomena are amenable to systematic, scientific analysis using a rigorous methodology.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Monitor your local news for three reports of possible suicide cases. From the information provided, are any of the details presented as factors that would contribute to explaining the death as a 'suicide'? Why might coroners lean away from a suicide verdict, and would that practice affect Durkheim's argument that there are suicide rates in particular societies? Should we accept the WHO statistics in figure 1.1 above as 'social facts'?

Karl Marx

The ideas of Karl Marx (1818–83) contrast sharply with those of Comte and Durkheim, though he too sought to explain the changes associated with the Industrial Revolution. As a young man, Marx found that his political activities brought him into conflict with the German authorities, and after a brief stay in France he settled permanently in exile in Britain, where he saw the growth of factories and industrial production as well as growing inequality. His interest in the European labour movement and socialist ideas was reflected in his writings, and much of his work concentrated on political and economic issues. Yet,

since he connected economic problems to social institutions, his work was rich in sociological insights.

Marx wrote about the broad sweep of human history, but his primary focus was on the development of capitalism: a system of production that contrasts radically with all previous economies. Marx identified two main elements of capitalism. The first is capital – that is, any asset, including money, machines or even factories, that can be used or invested to make future assets. The accumulation of capital goes hand in hand with the second element, wage-labour. Wage-labour refers to the pool of workers who do not own any means of production themselves but must find employment provided by the owners of capital.

Some 'Occupy' protests around the world targeted 'greedy' forms of capitalism in which vast wealth accumulates among a tiny percentage of the population while 'the 99 per cent' majority struggle to make a living. Twenty-first-century anti-capitalist movements continue to take their inspiration from the analyses of Marx and Engels, though they rarely advocate communism as their preferred alternative.

Marx argued that those who own capital – capitalists – form a ruling class, while the mass of the population make up a class of waged workers – the working class. As industrialization spread, large numbers of peasants, who used to support themselves by working the land, moved to the expanding cities and helped to form an urban industrial working class, which Marx also called the proletariat. For Marx, this means that capitalism is a class system in which relations between the two main classes are characterized by an underlying conflict. Although owners of capital and workers are dependent on each other – capitalists need labour, workers need wages – this dependency is unbalanced. Workers have little or no control over their labour, and employers are able to generate profit by appropriating the products of the workers' labour – paying them less than their labour is worth.

Marx saw conflicts between classes as the motivation for historical development; they are the 'motor of history'. Marx and Engels (2008 [1848]) wrote at the beginning of *The Communist Manifesto*, 'The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles.' According to Marx, there have been a series of historical stages, beginning with 'primitive communist' societies of hunters and gatherers and passing through ancient slave-owning systems and feudal systems with landowners and peasant farmers. The emergence of a new commercial or capitalist class displaced the landed nobility, and, just as capitalists had overthrown the feudal order, so too would the capitalists be overthrown by the proletariat.

Marx theorized that a workers' revolution would bring about a new society in which there would be no large-scale division between owners and workers. He called this historical stage communism. This does not mean that all inequalities would magically disappear, but that society would no longer be split into a small class that monopolizes economic and political power and a mass of people who benefit little from their labour. The economic system would be under communal ownership, and a more humane, egalitarian society would slowly emerge.

Marx's ideas had a far-reaching effect on the twentieth century. Until only a generation ago, more than a third of the Earth's population lived in societies whose governments derived inspiration from Marx's ideas.

However, a revolutionary wave that began in Poland in 1989 swept aside communist regimes across Eastern Europe, ending with the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union – its stronghold – in 1991. Even in China, where a communist party still holds political power, capitalist economic development has taken a firm hold. In spite of the spread of capitalism around the world, the working-class revolution to which Marx looked forward seems no closer today than it did in Marx's own time.

Max Weber

Like Marx, Max Weber (1864–1920) was not just a sociologist; his interests ranged across many areas. He was born in Germany, where he spent most of his academic career, and his work covered economics, law, philosophy and comparative history as well as sociology. He was also concerned with the development of capitalism and how modern societies differed from earlier types. In a series of studies, Weber set out some of the basic characteristics of modern industrial societies and identified key issues that remain central to sociology today.

Weber recognized class conflict but saw it as less significant than Marx. In Weber's view, economic factors *are* important, but ideas and values can also bring about social change. His celebrated and much discussed work *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1992 [1904–5]) proposed that religious values – especially those associated with Puritanism – were of fundamental importance in creating a capitalistic outlook. Unlike the other early sociologists, Weber argued that sociologists should study social action – the subjectively meaningful actions of people that are oriented towards others. It is the job of sociology to understand the meanings behind all of those individual actions.

An important element in Weber's sociological perspective is the ideal type. Ideal types are models that are created to alert us to some social phenomenon and to help us to make sense of it. These hypothetical constructions can be very useful in pointing researchers towards a subject. For example, we could construct a simple idealtypical 'terrorist group', based on the most striking aspects that have been observed in the cases of the IRA in Northern Ireland, ETA in Spain, the Red Brigades

in Italy and the global networks of ISIS/Daesh. We might note that all these groups operate outside mainstream politics; they use violence against the state and they often target civilians to demonstrate their power. We can then use this ideal type to analyse other real-world instances of political violence.

Of course, in reality there are many differences between our four groups. The Red Brigades were communist, the IRA was an Irish nationalist group, ETA was a Basque separatist organization and ISIS/Daesh is a global Islamist network. Nonetheless, using our ideal type we can accommodate these differences while also recognizing that they share enough features to be described collectively as 'terrorist groups'. It is important to note that, by 'ideal' type, Weber did not mean that the conception was perfect or desirable. Ideal types are 'pure' or 'one-sided' forms of real social phenomena. But constructing an ideal type of terrorism (or anything else) from common aspects of many observed cases is more effective and useful than using one real terrorist group as a template for others.

Weber saw the emergence of modern society as accompanied by important shifts in patterns of social action. People were moving away from traditional beliefs grounded in superstition, religion, custom and longstanding habit. Instead, they engaged increasingly in rational, instrumental calculation that took into account efficiency and the future consequences of the action. In industrial society, there was little room for sentiment or doing things just because they had 'always been done that way'. The emergence of science, modern technology and bureaucracy was described by Weber as rationalization – the organization of social life according to principles of efficiency and on the basis of technical knowledge. If religion and longstanding customs previously guided people's attitudes and values, modern society was marked by the rationalization of politics, religion, economic activity and even music.

Weber had major concerns about the outcome of the rationalization process. He feared that the spread of bureaucracy, which is the most efficient form of administration, would stifle creativity and imprison individuals in a 'steel-hard cage' from which there would be little chance of escape. This bureaucratic domination, although based on

rational principles, could crush the human spirit by over-regulating every aspect of life. For Weber, the seemingly progressive agenda of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment, of scientific progress, rising wealth and increasing happiness, also brought with it a dark side with new dangers.

Three theoretical traditions

As we have seen, Durkheim, Marx and Weber adopted different approaches to their studies. Durkheim emphasized the coercive strength of social forces in generating shared values and consensus. Marx also saw social structures as powerful, but he argued that conflict and inequality were endemic in all societies. On the other hand, Max Weber focused attention on the meaningful character of social life and the social actions of individuals. These basic differences have persisted throughout the history of sociology, developing into three broad sociological traditions: functionalism (Durkheim), conflict theory (Marx) and social action or 'interactionist' approaches (Weber).

Some of the major trade and economic transactions today take place on the stock market in a highly rationalized form, with barely any personal interaction between traders. This is in stark contrast to the personalized bartering and market stall negotiations which continue in many local communities.

The three traditions are introduced briefly below, but you will encounter arguments and ideas that draw upon them throughout the book. After a while you should be able to identify which tradition any particular research study you come across is closest to.

We look in detail at more recently developed theoretical approaches, such as feminism, postmodernism and figurational studies, in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Functionalism

Functionalism holds that society is a complex system whose various parts work together to produce stability and that sociology should investigate their relationships. For example, we can analyse the religious beliefs and customs of a society by showing how they relate to other institutions because the different parts of a society always develop in close relation to one another. Functionalists, including Comte and Durkheim, have often used an organic analogy, comparing the operation of society to a living organism. They argue that the parts of society work together, just as the various parts of the human body do, for the benefit of society as a whole. To study a bodily organ such as the heart, we need to show how it relates to other parts of the body. By pumping blood around the body, the heart plays a vital role in the continuation of the life of the organism. Similarly, analysing the function of a social institution such as the education system means showing the part it plays in the smooth running of a society.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

1.1 Neglected founders of sociology?

Sociology, like many academic fields, has not always lived up to the ideal of acknowledging scholarly work on the basis of its intrinsic merit. Very few women or members of minority ethnic groups had the opportunity to become professional sociologists in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And the few who did engage in sociological work of lasting importance have frequently been ignored and their work neglected. Here we introduce three important scholars whose work has attracted attention over recent years.

Harriet Martineau (1802–76)

Harriet Martineau has been called the 'first woman sociologist', but, like Marx and Weber, she cannot be thought of simply as a sociologist. She was born and educated in England and was the author of more than fifty books as well as numerous essays. Martineau is now credited with introducing sociology to Britain through her translation of Comte's founding treatise, *Positive Philosophy* (see Rossi 1973). In addition, she conducted a first-hand, systematic study of American society during her extensive travels throughout the United States in the 1830s, the subject of her book *Society in America* (Martineau 1962 [1837]). Martineau is significant to sociologists today for several reasons.

First, she argued that, when one studies a society, one must focus on all its aspects, including key political, religious and social institutions. Second, she insisted that an analysis of a society must include an understanding of women's lives, something that became commonplace in mainstream sociology with feminist interventions only in the 1970s. Third, she was the first to turn a sociological eye on previously ignored issues, among them marriage, children, domestic and religious life, and race relations. As she once wrote: 'The nursery, the boudoir, and the kitchen are all excellent schools

in which to learn the morals and manners of a people' (1962 [1837]). Finally, she argued that sociologists should do more than just observe; they should also act in ways to benefit a society. As a result, Martineau was an active proponent of both women's rights and the emancipation of slaves.

W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963)

Du Bois was an American sociologist, historian and black civil rights activist, the first African American to gain a doctorate from Harvard (in 1895), and professor of history, sociology and economics at Atlanta University. His work covered empirical studies, philosophy, sociological theory and history and is characterized by three highly significant books: *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *Black Reconstruction in America* (1935).

In *Souls*, Du Bois focused on the failure of the abolition of slavery in the USA in the 1860s to bring about racial equality. He argued that black people in Southern states lived with a 'double consciousness'; being both black and American, they should be able to be without 'being cursed and spit upon by his [*sic*] fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face' (Du Bois 1903: 2–3). He saw the main problem of the coming twentieth century was that of the 'color line', the segregation of whites and blacks. His meticulous empirical sociological study of a poor, largely black district of Philadelphia (2007 [1899]) was an ambitious mapping of urban poverty. Du Bois showed that white racism effectively set limits to the sectors and occupations that black people could enter, thus empirically falsifying the idea that their poverty was due to laziness and a lack of innate intelligence. Most scholars now acknowledge this study as a key forerunner to the work of the Chicago School of Sociology (see chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life').

Finally, Lemert (2000: 244) argues that the Marxist influence on Du Bois's writing is strongest in *Black Reconstruction*, which traces post-emancipation structured relations between workers and plantation owners. In this, he saw that the color line 'cut through the laboring class as well as between the labor class and the propertied'. Du Bois's work was largely absent from the history of

sociology, even in the USA, but interest in it has rapidly increased as a result of postcolonial scholarship and attempts to decolonize sociology.

Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406)

The Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun was born in what is today Tunisia and is famous for his historical, sociological and political-economic studies. He wrote many books, the most widely known of which is a six-volume work, the *Muqaddimah* ('Introduction'), completed in 1378. This is viewed by some scholars today as essentially an early foundational work of sociology (see Alatas 2006). The *Muqaddimah* criticized existing historical approaches and methods as dealing only with description, claiming instead the discovery of a new 'science of social organization', or 'science of society', capable of getting at the underlying meaning of events.

Ibn Khaldun devised a theory of social conflict based on understanding the central characteristics of the 'nomadic' and 'sedentary' societies of his time. Central to this theory was the concept of 'group feeling' or solidarity (*asabiyyah*). Groups and societies with a strong group feeling were able to dominate and control those with weaker forms of internal solidarity. Ibn Khaldun developed these ideas in an attempt to explain the rise and decline of Maghribian and Arab states, and in this sense he may be seen as studying the process of state-formation – itself a main concern of modern, Western historical sociology. Nomadic Bedouin tribes tended towards a very strong group feeling, which enabled them to overrun and dominate the weaker sedentary town-dwellers and establish new dynasties. However, the Bedouin then became settled into more urbanized lifestyles and their previously strong group feeling and military force diminished, thus leaving them open to attack from external enemies once again. This completed a long cycle in the rise and decline of states. Although Western historians and sociologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century referred to Ibn Khaldun's work, only in very recent years has it again come to be seen as potentially significant.

Functionalism emphasizes the importance of moral consensus in maintaining order and stability. Moral consensus exists when most people in a society share the same values. Functionalists regard order and balance as the normal state of society, and this social equilibrium is grounded in the moral consensus among society's members. For instance, Durkheim argued that religious beliefs reaffirm people's adherence to core social values, thereby contributing to the maintenance of social cohesion.

Until the 1960s, functionalism was probably the leading theoretical tradition in sociology, particularly in the United States. Talcott Parsons (1902–79) and Robert K. Merton (1910–2003) were two of its most prominent exponents. Merton's version of functionalism has been particularly influential. He distinguished between manifest and latent functions. Manifest functions are those known to, and intended by, the participants in a specific type of social activity. Latent functions are consequences of that activity of which the participants are unaware. For instance, Merton examined the rain dance performed by the Hopi tribe of Arizona and New Mexico. The Hopi believe that this ceremony will bring the rain they need for their crops (a manifest function). But the rain dance, Merton argued, also has the effect of promoting group cohesion of Hopi society (its latent function). A major part of sociological explanations, according to Merton, consists in uncovering the latent functions of intentional social activities and institutions.

Merton also distinguished between functions and dysfunctions. To look for the dysfunctional aspects of social behaviour means focusing on features of social life that challenge the existing order of things. For example, it is mistaken to suppose that religion is always functional and that it only contributes to social cohesion. When religious groups disagree with one another the result can be major social conflict,

causing widespread social disruption. Thus, wars have often been fought between religious communities – as can be seen in the struggles between Protestants and Catholics in Europe or between Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Middle East.

Since the late 1970s the popularity of functionalism has waned as its limitations have become apparent. Though it is not true of Merton, many functionalist thinkers focused on stability and social order, minimizing social divisions and inequalities based on factors such as class, ethnicity and gender. Functionalism also placed too little emphasis on the role that creative social action can play within society. Many critics argued that functional analysis attributes to societies social qualities that they do not have. For instance, many functionalists often wrote as though whole societies have 'needs' and 'purposes', even though these concepts make sense only when applied to individual human beings. Just as significantly, in the 1960s and 1970s there emerged a wave of so-called new social movements – involving, among others, students, environmentalists and peace movements – which functional analysis seemed particularly ill-equipped to understand and explain.

Conflict theories

Like functionalists, sociologists using conflict theories emphasize the importance of social structures, advancing a comprehensive 'model' to explain how society works. However, conflict theorists reject functionalism's emphasis on consensus. Instead, they highlight the importance of social divisions and concentrate on issues of power, inequality and competitive struggle. They tend to see society as composed of distinct groups, each pursuing its own interests, which means the potential for conflict is always present. Conflict theorists examine the tensions between dominant and disadvantaged groups, looking to understand how relationships of control are established and maintained.

Both Marx and later Marxist approaches have been highly influential in conflict theory, though it is important to note that by no means all conflict theories are Marxist. Feminism, for example, is a form of conflict theory which concentrates on gender inequality – the unequal

situation between men and women that exists in most societies. For some feminist theorists, gender inequality is more significant than class-based inequality and has a much longer history. Male domination of society continues even today, though women's political activism has made an impact in many areas of life, bringing about a measure of equality (Abbott et al. 2005).

As a conflict perspective in sociology, feminism draws attention to issues that sociologists previously ignored. In particular, feminist research and theorizing look at the micro level as well as the macro world of large social structures. For example, feminists have studied unequal gender relations in domestic situations and other 'private' spheres of life (such as sexual relations), a controversial move in the 1960s and 1970s (Rahman and Jackson 2010). Feminists have also carried out research into the use of gender stereotypes and language in interactions, pointing out and challenging many taken-for-granted 'malestream' assumptions (favouring men over women) built into the structure of how we describe and think about the world. We can see this in numerous everyday words and expressions, such as chairman, mankind (to discuss humanity as such) and man-made. This is a simple illustration of the myriad ways in which women's subordinate position in society is reflected in the unacknowledged male domination of language itself.

Feminists do not ignore the macro level either. Feminist studies have shown that gender inequality is embedded within modern social structures such as legal systems, education and schooling, government and politics, and many more. Similarly, in order to demonstrate the extent and scope of gender inequality, feminist work has made use of official statistics and examined patterns of change over long time periods. Feminist theorizing has continually developed into new areas and types of theory, and these are covered in more detail later in the book.

Feminist research and theorizing can be found throughout the various chapters of the book, but there are significant discussions of feminist theory and its development in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', and chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality'.

Symbolic interactionism

Weber's social action approach inspired many 'interactionist' forms of sociology. One of the most influential has been symbolic interactionism, which also owes much to the American social philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Symbolic interactionism springs from a concern with language and meaning. Mead argues that language allows us to become self-conscious beings – aware of our own individuality and able to see ourselves 'as others see us'. The key element in this process is the symbol. A symbol is something that stands for something else. For example, words that refer to objects are symbols which represent what we mean. The word 'spoon' is a symbol we use to describe the utensil that we use to consume soup. Non-verbal gestures and forms of communication are also symbols. Waving at someone or making a rude gesture both have symbolic value.

Symbolic interactionism directs our attention to the details of interpersonal interaction and how that detail is used to make sense of what others say and do. Sociologists influenced by symbolic interactionism often focus on face-to-face interactions in the context of everyday life. They stress the role interactions play in creating society and its institutions. Max Weber was an important indirect influence on this theoretical approach because, although he acknowledged the existence of social structures, he held that these were created through the actions of individuals.

While the symbolic interactionist perspective has yielded many insights into the nature of our actions in the course of day-to-day social life, it

has been criticized for ignoring the larger issues of power and social structure and how these serve to constrain individual action. However, one very good example of interactionism that does take into account such issues is Arlie Hochschild's (1983) *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. Hochschild observed training sessions and carried out interviews at Delta Airlines' Stewardess Training Centre in Atlanta, USA. She watched flight attendants being trained to manage their feelings as well as learning other skills. Hochschild (2012 [1983]: 4) recalled the comments of one instructor, a pilot: 'Now girls, I want you to go out there and really smile', he instructed. 'Your smile is your biggest asset. I want you to go out there and use it. Smile. Really smile. Really lay it on.'

Hochschild's research found that, as Western economies have become increasingly based on the delivery of services, the emotional style of the work we do needs to be understood. Her study of 'customer service' training might be familiar to anyone who has worked in fast food restaurants, shops or bars. Hochschild calls this training a form of 'emotional labour' – labour that requires the management of feelings in order to create a publicly observable and acceptable facial and bodily display. According to Hochschild, companies providing services increasingly lay claim not only to workers' physical activity but also to their presentation of emotions.

In many service industries, workers' skills extend to the continuous management of their public display of emotions, which can be as exhausting as other forms of work.

This research considered an aspect of life that most people took for granted and showed that sociology could deepen our understanding of it. Hochschild found that service workers – like physical labourers – often feel a sense of distance or alienation from the particular aspect of themselves that is given up in work. The physical labourer's arm, for example, might come to feel like a piece of machinery and only incidentally a part of the person moving it. Likewise, service workers often told Hochschild that their smiles were *on* them but not *of* them. In other words, they felt distanced from their own emotions. Hochschild's book is an influential application of symbolic interactionism, and many other scholars have built on her ideas to expand the interactionist tradition.

Traditions and theories

Functionalism, conflict theory and symbolic interactionism are theoretical traditions – broad, overall orientations to the subject matter

of sociology. However, we can make a distinction between these broad *traditions* and the particular *theories* which develop from them. Theories are more narrowly focused and are attempts to explain particular social conditions, events or social changes. For example, feminism is part of the conflict tradition, as feminists see a basic conflict in society between the interests of men and women. But feminist sociologists have also devised numerous narrower theories to explain specific aspects of gender relations (patterned relationships between men and women), such as why more married women are entering paid work, why women are still seen as responsible for childcare, or why young men now do less well in education than young women. Many theories of this kind have been developed in the different areas of life that sociologists study.

The fact that sociology is not dominated by a single theoretical tradition could be seen as a sign of weakness, but this is not the case. The jostling of rival traditions and theories is an expression of the vitality of the sociological enterprise. In studying human beings – ourselves – theoretical diversity rescues us from dogma and stagnation. Human behaviour is many-sided and it is unlikely that a single theoretical perspective could cover all of its aspects. Diversity in theoretical thinking provides a rich source of ideas which stimulate the creative capacities that are so essential to progress in social scientific work.

Levels of analysis: microsociology and macrosociology

One important distinction between different theoretical perspectives involves the level of analysis at which each is directed. The study of everyday behaviour in situations of face-to-face interaction is usually called microsociology, while macrosociology is the analysis of large-scale social structures and long-term processes of change. At first glance, it might seem that microanalysis and macroanalysis are entirely distinct from each other, but in practice the two are closely connected (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Giddens 1984).

Macroanalysis is essential if we are to understand the institutional backdrop of daily life. The ways in which people live their everyday

lives are influenced by social institutions, as is obvious when we consider the impact on our lives of the education system, the political framework and the system of laws by which we live. Similarly, while we may choose to send an acquaintance an email message, we can also choose to fly thousands of miles to spend the weekend with a friend. Neither of these communications would be possible without the amazingly complex global infrastructure of our world and the many people, organizations and institutions required to build and operate them.

Microanalysis is in turn necessary for illuminating the details of such broad institutional patterns. Face-to-face interaction is clearly the main basis of all forms of social organization, no matter how large the scale. Suppose we are studying a business corporation. We can understand its activities by looking at face-to-face behaviour – the interaction of directors in the boardroom, workers in the various offices, or workers on the factory floor. We may not build up a complete picture of the whole corporation this way, but we could certainly make a significant contribution to understanding how the organization works 'on the ground'.

Of course, people do not live their lives as isolated individuals, nor are their lives completely determined by large social structures. Sociology tells us that everyday life is lived in families, social groups, communities and neighbourhoods. At this level – the meso (or 'middle') level of society – it is possible to see the influence and effects of both micro- and macro-level phenomena. Many sociological studies of local communities deal with the macrosociological impact of huge social changes, such as economic restructuring, but they also explore the ways in which individuals, groups and social movements cope with such changes and turn them to their advantage.

For example, the 2008 financial crisis led to rising unemployment and falling living standards, but this also forced some people to learn new skills or start their own small businesses. Individuals are not simply at the mercy of large-scale social and economic changes but adapt creatively to them. Studying the community level of social life provides a window through which to observe the interaction of micro and macro

levels of society. Much applied research (research with a practical aim) in sociology takes place at this *meso* level of social reality.

In later chapters, we will see further examples of how interaction in micro contexts affects larger social processes and how macro systems in turn influence more confined settings of social life. However, there remains one fundamental issue to be tackled in this chapter: what exactly is sociology for?

[The uses of sociology](#)

Sociology has practical implications for our lives, as C. Wright Mills emphasized when developing his concept of the sociological imagination. First, sociology gives us an awareness of cultural differences that allows us to see the social world from many perspectives. Quite often, if we properly understand how others live, we also acquire a better understanding of what their problems are. Practical policies that are not based on an informed awareness of the ways of life of people they affect have little chance of success. For example, a white English social worker operating in a predominantly Latin American community in South London will not gain the confidence of its members without being sensitive to the different experiences of ethnic groups in the UK.

Second, sociological research provides practical help in assessing the results of policy initiatives. A programme of practical reform may simply fail to achieve what its designers sought or may produce [unintended consequences](#) of an unfortunate kind. In the years following the Second World War, large public housing blocks were built in city centres in many countries. These aimed to provide high standards of accommodation for low-income groups from slum areas. However, research later showed that many people who had moved from their previous dwellings to large apartment blocks felt isolated and unhappy. High-rise apartment blocks often became dilapidated and provided breeding grounds for crime.

Third, many sociologists concern themselves directly with practical matters as professionals. People trained in sociology are to be found as industrial consultants, researchers in 'think tanks', urban planners, social workers and personnel managers, as well as in many other careers. An understanding of society and social relations can also be useful for future careers in law and criminal justice, journalism, business and the health professions.

Fourth, and in some ways most importantly, sociology can provide us all with self-enlightenment or increased self-understanding. The more we

know about why we act as we do and about the overall workings of our society, the more likely we are to be able to influence our own future. Sociology does not just assist powerful groups or governments. The knowledge sociologists produce is made available to everyone and is often used by voluntary agencies, charities and social movements to bolster their case for change. However, sociological research findings, in themselves, are 'neutral'. That is, they can tell us what society is like, how it 'works' and how it changes over time, but they cannot advise on whether it *should* be that way. That is the proper subject of competing political and moral debates that involve everyone.

Public and professional sociology

In recent years, some sociologists have argued that sociology has not engaged enough with the public and has concentrated too much on internal professional debates. In his presidential address to the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association in 2004, Michael Burawoy argued for a new 'public sociology' that would forge relationships with audiences beyond the narrow confines of universities. He maintains that the professionalization of sociology in the twentieth century was beneficial, but it also led to sociologists talking more to each other than to the public 'out there' (Burawoy 2005).

Burawoy says there are four types of sociology: professional sociology, policy sociology, critical sociology and public sociology. *Professional sociology* is the conventional, universitybased, scientific sociology which generates large research programmes and bodies of knowledge and provides academic careers. *Policy sociology* includes all those studies which pursue goals defined by clients, such as funding bodies and government departments looking to tackle social problems. *Critical sociology* is 'the conscience of professional sociology', which points out the questionable assumptions of research projects and professional sociology (Burawoy 2005: 9). Feminist theory is one example of this strand, drawing attention to the gaps in scientific sociology and its unstated biases. *Public sociology* is the fourth type and is rooted in dialogue. That is, public sociology speaks with social groups such as trade unions, social movements, faith groups and organizations in civil

[society](#) in a genuine conversation about the future direction of society. In this sense, the suggestion is that a more politically engaged sociology is necessary, though this is not something that all sociologists would support.

For Burawoy and others, public sociology still depends on professional sociology, but the two exist in a relationship of 'antagonistic interdependence'. Scientific sociology produces research methods, empirical evidence and theories which are necessary for public sociology's engagement with non-academic audiences. But, unlike professional sociology, the public version opens up a dialogue with those audiences, allowing the discipline itself to be partly shaped by the concerns of non-sociologists.

Critics point out that this is a very stark dividing line. In practice, much of today's professional sociology already tries hard to engage with participants and outside audiences. There is also much more overlap between the four types described (Calhoun 2005; Ericson 2005). Many feminist studies, for instance, are not simply critiques of scientific sociology but are empirical themselves, using research methods and questionnaires and contributing to professional sociology. Critics also argue that there is a danger that the discipline will become subordinated to the political motives of social movements and activist groups. If the image and reputation of professional sociology is tainted, then it may, paradoxically, have serious consequences for public support for the discipline. And if public sociology really is dependent on the hard-won scientific credibility of professional sociology, it too could suffer.

Nonetheless, in spite of such criticisms, the basic argument that professional sociology has not done enough to engage with public concerns has been quite widely welcomed. The lack of a public presence for sociology is seen as damaging to the public awareness of sociological theories and evidence, which leaves a gap to be filled by other disciplines such as political science, history or psychology. Professional associations, such as the British Sociological Association, have taken steps to encourage their members to develop more of a media presence as an initial move towards raising the profile of sociology in society, and we can probably expect this trend to continue.

__Summary__

Sociology has developed as a discipline in which we set aside our personal view of the world in order to look more carefully at the influences that shape our lives and those of others. Sociology emerged as a distinct intellectual endeavour with the development of modern societies, and the study of such societies remains a central concern. However, in an increasingly interconnected global world, sociologists must take a similarly global view of their subject matter if they are properly to understand and explain it. During the founding period of sociology, society's central problems included social class conflict, wealth distribution, the alleviation of poverty, and the question of where the process of modernization was headed.

In the contemporary period most of these issues remain, but it may be argued that sociology's central problems are shifting. Today there are also other issues such as rapid globalization, international terrorism, health pandemics, environmental damage, global risks with potentially grave consequences, multiculturalism and gender inequality. This means that sociologists have to question whether the theories designed to grasp problems of an earlier period still have any purchase on the new issues of today. If not, then we will need to design new theories that are better able to perceive what Karl Mannheim once called 'the secret of these new times'. The ongoing debate about the status and continuing relevance of the classical sociological theories runs throughout this book.

Sociology is not just an abstract intellectual field but has practical implications for people's lives, and learning to become a sociologist should not be a dull or tedious endeavour. The best way to make sure it does not become so is to approach the subject in an imaginative way and to relate sociological ideas and findings to situations in your own life. In that way, you should learn important things about yourself as well as better understanding social life, societies and the wider human world.

❓ **[Chapter review](#)**

1. What aspects mark out the sociological imagination as different from the perspective of the individual person? What is sociology's main subject matter?

2. What were the social, economic and political problems that the early sociologists sought to understand and solve?

3. List the main contributions made to the founding of sociology by Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. What assumptions about societies are shared by all four and in what ways do their perspectives diverge?

4. Theoretical disputes are difficult to resolve even in the natural sciences, but what makes them peculiarly problematic in sociology?

5. Outline the three central theoretical traditions in Euro-American sociological theory. Is it fair to suggest that sociology needs all three if it is to be successful, or does one tradition have a better grasp of social reality? What issues have risen to prominence since the latter part of the twentieth century that none of the three traditions has adequately incorporated?

6. Using examples of ethnicity or gender, explain how micro and macro levels of social life are connected. What is meant by the meso level of social reality?

7. What are the practical implications and applications of sociological research? List the ways in which sociology can make a valuable contribution to improving social life.

8. Should sociologists become more involved in political debates in order to influence policies or should they just get on with their research and let others decide how their findings should be used? Can you think of any reason why sociologists might withhold their findings for political reasons? Should they?

🔎 <u>**Research in practice**</u>

We have seen that the concept of emotional labour was developed initially by Arlie Hochschild from within the symbolic interactionist tradition. Workers who engage in emotional labour often say that it is exhausting. But why is this the case? Sechelski and Story (2018) look into this issue in relation to academic advisors in the USA.

Read their article online and try the questions that follow:

Sechelski, A. N., and Story, C. V. (2018) 'So This is Why I'm Exhausted: Emotional Labor Explained', *Academic Advising Today*, 41(2); www.nacada.ksu.edu/Resources/Academic-Advising-Today/View-Articles/So-This-Is-Why-Im-Exhausted-Emotional-Labor-Explained.aspx.

1. What kind of research is this? Where do the researchers gather their evidence from?

2. In relation to emotional labour, what is meant by 'surface acting' and 'deep acting'?

3. Why do the authors say the deep acting is less exhausting than surface acting?

4. What can the advisors do to avoid exhaustion and 'burnout'? Do you agree with the authors' conclusions?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Sociological theories have long been distinguished from each other by their focus primarily on social structure or human agency or the extent to which people are shaped by their society, or vice versa. Anthony Giddens suggests that the process of structuration helps us to avoid focusing on *either* structure *or* agency. Examples we provide in the chapter are the way that communist regimes collapsed in the late 1980s and the 1990s and popular uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa in 2011–12 challenged the existing authorities.

Do your own research into both sets of events. What are the main similarities and differences between these historical revolts and their eventual outcomes? Can we say that there is always scope for changing the existing social structure? Are social structures really as malleable as structuration theory says? Does structuration theory pay too little attention to the power of existing authorities to resist radical change from below?

⭐ <u>Society in the arts</u>

Read the following statement carefully.

> ... to speak of art and social theory as equal partners is to say that art represents a source of existential social knowledge that is of its own worth and is not inferior to the knowledge of social science. It is to say that there are certain things that art can tell us about society that social science cannot tell us ... Novels, plays, films, paintings and drawings tell us different things about social life from the things a piece of social scientific research can tell us about social life, and to the extent that they tell us these different things, they tell us *more things*. (Harrington 2004: 3)

Consider a novel, play, film, painting or other work of art you have recently read, seen or heard. What does this work tell us about social life that is a) *different from* what sociology tells us and b) *more than* sociological knowledge? Can the knowledge provided by the work be compared to social scientific findings or are they just incommensurable?

Further reading

For those who are new to sociology, Zygmunt Bauman and Tim May's (2019) *Thinking Sociologically* (3rd edn, Chichester: Wiley Blackwell) is an up-to-date guide to developing and using your sociological imagination, with many everyday examples. Something closer to a personal view of sociology can be found in Richard Jenkins's (2002) *Foundations of Sociology: Towards a Better Understanding of the Human World* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), which explores the role of sociology and sociologists in an age of globalization.

One other useful resource is a good sociology dictionary. John Scott's (2014) *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* (4th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press) and Bryan S. Turner's (2006) *The Cambridge Dictionary of Sociology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) are reliable and comprehensive. For a guide to some of the key concepts used in sociological work, see our own companion, Giddens and Sutton's *Essential Concepts in Sociology* (3rd edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

For a collection of readings covering the range of sociology, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

The International Sociological Association – represents sociologists around the world:
www.isa-sociology.org/

The European Sociological Association – aims to facilitate research into European issues:
www.europeansociology.org/

The British Sociological Association – some helpful information on graduate careers from the BSA:
www.britsoc.co.uk/what-is-sociology/sociologist-careers.aspx

SocioSite – the Social Science Information System, based at the University of Amsterdam:
www.sociosite.net/index.php

Public Sociology – Michael Burawoy's version of public sociology and some of his critics:
http://burawoy.berkeley.edu/PS.Webpage/ps.mainpage.htm

CHAPTER 2

ASKING AND ANSWERING SOCIOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

CONTENTS

Public spaces such as city parks have long provided an anonymous meeting place for sexual encounters between men in cultures which stigmatize same-sex relationships.

The search for anonymous, instant sex between men is known all over the world. A lot of men – married and unmarried, those with straight identities and those whose identify as gay – seek sex with people they do not know, many looking for sexual excitement without emotional involvement or commitment. Such encounters have often taken place in public places, such as specific areas of parks or in public toilets, to avoid discovery. In 1970s America the gay community called the toilet blocks where these encounters took place 'tearooms' while in the UK it was known as 'cottaging'. In modern China, some saunas, clubs, public toilets and areas of public parks, such as Dongdan Park in Beijing, are known meeting places for men who have sex with men (often abbreviated as MSM).

Until the late 1960s, same-sex activity in public places was rarely studied as a form of interaction. The research of the American sociologist Laud Humphreys into 'tearooms' was among the first studies, published in his book *Tearoom Trade* (1970), which was

controversial at that time. Homosexuality was not decriminalized in China until 1997 and since 2001 has no longer been defined as a 'mental disorder'. Same-sex relations are tolerated more than in the past, but the equalization of legal rights that exist in other societies is absent in China. Traditional beliefs in duty to family and sexual relations only within heterosexual marriage have also waned somewhat since the 1970s political reforms, economic development and increasing internet access. Despite these social changes, homosexuality has long been viewed as a deviant form of sexuality in Chinese society and remains stigmatized. In both 1970s USA and contemporary China, the stigma attached to same-sex relationships presented sociologists trying to understand the tearoom phenomenon with the problem of gaining access to those involved.

Humphreys' study was carried out before the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, and some of the activities he witnessed then are today seen as carrying more risks. In China, for example, men using public places for sexual encounters have emerged as a high-risk group for HIV infection (Shang and Zhang 2015). Many MSM encounters in China still take place without regard for safe-sex practices such as the use of condoms: Shang and Zhang recorded that 45.7 per cent of MSM reported having unprotected sex. Li and his colleagues (2010) argue that one reason for this lies in mainstream Chinese culture, where the concept of *rouyu* – a desire for direct physical contact – is widely used to mean 'making love'. For those men seeking spontaneous, uncommitted sex with other men, condoms may be seen to interfere with achieving *rouyu*. As one participant told researchers, 'No matter how thin a condom is, there is still a layer of something, and it [sex] is not between fleshes' (Li et al. 2010: 1481).

Both Humphreys (1970) and Li et al. (2010) studied an aspect of social life that many people did not properly understand or just did not know existed. Sociological research has been an important source of more realistic knowledge about many areas of social life that were effectively hidden from view. Humphreys spent an extended period of time researching public toilets in order to collect information and make observations and later conducted survey interviews. He discovered that many men who otherwise lived 'normal' lives also found ways – and

places – to engage in sexual behaviour considered unacceptable. Research studies in sociology often shine a light on activities that are poorly understood or that people did not know about at all. Humphreys also argued that, if society accepted homosexuality, it would help men to provide one another with self-esteem and mutual support. This highlights another important aspect of research – that it can lead to recommendations for positive social and policy changes.

Research projects are usually stimulated by a question the researcher wants to answer. Why did public toilets become places for men to meet other men for sex? Are married men in opposite-sex marriages exclusively heterosexual? Why do some men in China not practise safe sex despite knowing the risks involved? To generate such questions, sociologists must be engaged or 'involved' in social life, and many projects stem from the researcher's personal experience and observations or their political commitments. For example, much of the research into human rights, poverty, social inequality and environmental sustainability is linked to researchers' own commitment to reducing poverty and inequality and finding ways to tackle environmental problems. Emotional and political involvements such as these are quite normal and form one aspect of sociological research.

However, during the collection of data, in the analysis of the evidence and in reporting the findings, they must strive to prevent their prior emotional and political commitments from influencing their judgement, which could result in bias. The research by Li et al. was collated and reported in this relatively 'detached' manner, even though the project was prompted by a desire to understand why many MSM shun the use of condoms *and* to help to change this. They showed that traditional cultural beliefs continue in the twenty-first century and advocated a combination of online social media and traditional community-based interventions to promote condom use.

What is evident from these two studies, over four decades apart, is that sociologists, being humans, are inevitably emotionally and politically *involved*, looking to understand, explain and offer solutions to the social problems of the day. But, during their research, they also strive for relative *detachment* from their personal beliefs, and achieving a productive balance between involvement and detachment is crucial to

all good sociology (Elias 1987b). Yet this is not easy, and, as we shall see later, philosophers have long argued about whether detachment or 'objectivity' is even possible in the social science disciplines.

Next we look at some ethical dilemmas facing sociologists who are engaged in empirical research. We then explore what is meant by 'science' before investigating the nature of sociology as a distinct discipline. From here we move on to examine the research process and briefly summarize the most widely used research methods and their applications. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the uses of sociology in society. As we shall see, there are some significant differences between the ideal of scientific work and real-world studies that inevitably have to deal with numerous obstacles. A sensible way to think about sociological research is to see it, like all science, as the art of the possible.

[Human subjects](), [ethical issues]()

All research concerned with human beings poses ethical dilemmas – matters of moral right and wrong – for researchers. In this respect, the social sciences face issues that most research in the natural sciences do not. Is it justifiable for researchers to deceive the people they study about what the research is really about? What steps have been taken to make sure that participants have given genuine informed consent to being involved – a particularly important issue in research with children and vulnerable social groups? How will researchers protect the privacy and anonymity of participants? How will personal information be stored and for how long? Is there any risk of participants experiencing negative effects from the research and, if so, how will this risk be managed? Thinking through the ethical implications of any proposed research is important because, unless a project team can satisfactorily address the ethical issues, it may not go ahead.

Humphreys' methodology was criticized as unethical because his fieldwork was conducted covertly, without the genuine informed consent of those he studied. Ethical issues are more prominent today than in the past, and researchers are no longer seen as the only knowledgeable experts with participants as mere 'subjects' whose presence in the research process is strictly limited. Increasingly, the participants are themselves involved in the research process and may help to formulate questions, comment on the researcher's interpretations, and receive a copy of the final research report.

As in many other relationships in social life (such as doctors and patients or university lecturers and students), 'laypeople' no longer automatically defer to 'experts' in the way they might have done one or two generations ago. This broader social process is transforming research practice. Indeed, funding bodies now routinely ask research teams to anticipate the ethical issues they may confront, suggest how they will deal with these, and confirm whether deception will be used, what measures are in place to protect participants from risks, and how findings will be fed back at the end of the study. Clearly, research

practice is always embedded within a social and historical context which partly determines what can and cannot legitimately be studied.

In carrying out his research, Humphreys did not reveal his identity as a sociologist, and men who came into the tearoom assumed he was there for the same reasons they were. Although he did not tell direct lies, he also did not reveal the real reason for his presence. Was his behaviour legitimate? This aspect of the research did not put any of the men *directly* at risk, so perhaps it could be justified. What made Humphreys' project more controversial was that he took down the vehicle licence plates of his subjects, obtained their home addresses from a friend at the Department of Motor Vehicles, and then visited their homes on the pretence of conducting an unrelated survey. How ethical was this element of the study? Could it ever be justified? Even though he did not reveal to the men's families anything about the tearooms, the information he gathered *could* have been damaging. The same-sex activity he observed was illegal at the time, and police officers could have demanded the release of information on the men's identities. It is also possible that a less skilled investigator could have slipped up when interviewing the families or that Humphreys' notes could have been seen by others.

The methodology of Li et al. (2010) in Guangzhou, China, shows just how much research ethics and governance have changed since the 1970s. This team conducted semi-structured interviews to find out about participants' biographies. Like Humphreys, they also used participant observation in various venues, including four public toilets, and one team member joined a volunteer outreach group in order to build relationships with the target communities. A sample was then recruited from these social networks. However, unlike Humphreys, the researchers openly engaged with the participants about the project, its goals and the way the information they gave would be handled: 'After briefing about the objectives of the study, informed consent was obtained from the participants, who were assured of confidentiality, the use of pseudonyms, and safe storage of the data' (ibid.: 1482).

Considering the number of things that could go wrong in the research process, researchers today do not consider Humphreys' methods to be legitimate. Funding bodies such as the European Science Foundation

and the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), as well as universities, have much stricter ethical guidelines and codes of practice than in the past. It is unlikely that covert research involving the deception of subjects would be officially sanctioned today. Yet Humphreys was one of the first sociologists to study a hidden aspect of social life, and his account was a humane treatment of the subject going well beyond the existing stock of knowledge.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Read the first two chapters of Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade* and list his reasons for carrying out *covert* research rather than being open with his subjects. Which aspects of social life today are so difficult to access that we may never understand them by adhering to today's stricter research norms? On what grounds might a proposal for covert research be justified?

Science and sociology

The issues that concern sociologists are often those that worry other people. After all, sociologists are members of society too. Good research should help us to understand social life better and, quite often, to view it in new ways. *Tearoom Trade* provdes good examples of the kind of questions that sociologists ask. In looking at the activities that occur in public toilets, Humphreys found that something we take to be obvious – a public toilet – is actually *socially constructed*, depending on how people use it. Social constructionism is a perspective which begins from the premise that social reality is the product of interactions between individuals and groups, not something to be taken as 'natural' (see chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life', and chapter 5, 'The Environment'). In this case, what most people believed to be a public building with an obvious function was, for a particular group, *primarily* a venue for the pursuit of sexual activity.

Studying society often brings surprising results and frequently runs counter to 'common-sense' beliefs. What do teenagers actually use their smartphones for? Have the circumstances of ethnic and sexual minorities in Canada improved over time? Why does large-scale poverty still exist in the USA alongside the immense personal wealth of a small minority? Why have many people across the European Union lost faith in conventional party politics? Sociologists try to provide answers to these and many other questions, but their determinations are by no means final, as society is always in a process of change and later research makes new findings. Nevertheless, it is the aim of theorizing and research to break away from speculation and to base our understanding on evidence. Good sociology makes its research questions as precise as possible and seeks to gather factual evidence before reaching general conclusions. To achieve these aims, we must select the most useful research methods to use for a given study and know how best to analyse the results.

Sociologists often ask empirical or factual questions. For example, what kinds of occupation and domestic arrangements are most common among MSM in public parks and toilets in China? What proportion of

the participants do the police arrest? Even factual questions of this kind can be difficult to answer. There are no official statistics on sexual activity in tearooms, saunas and parks, for example. Similarly, official crime statistics have been found to be of dubious value in revealing the 'real' level of criminal activity in a society. Researchers who study crime say that police-recorded crime figures are just the visible tip of a much larger 'iceberg' of crime (Simmons and Dodds 2003). Indeed, some criminal actions may be seen by victims as purely private matters that are not 'crimes' at all (see chapter 22, 'Crime and Deviance', for a discussion of crime statistics).

Factual information about one national society will not tell us whether we are dealing with an unusual case or a more general set of social influences. Hence, sociologists often ask comparative questions, relating findings from one society to another social context or using contrasting examples drawn from different societies across the world. There are significant differences, for example, between the social and legal systems of Russia, Italy and South Korea. A typical comparative question might be: how much do patterns of criminal behaviour and law enforcement vary between these three countries? Answering this question might lead us to other questions, such as how did systems of law enforcement develop over time and how similar or different are the penal regimes in these countries?

In sociology, we need to compare not only contemporary societies but also the present and the past to gain a better understanding of social development. In this case we ask historical or developmental questions: how did we get from there to here? To understand the nature of the modern world, we have to look at previous forms of society and processes of social change. Thus we can investigate how the first prisons originated and what they are like today, tracing key periods or phases of change in this development. Doing so provides us with a good part of an explanation.

Sociological research is not just the collection of facts, however important and interesting they may be. It is a truism in sociology that 'the facts don't speak for themselves'; they always need to be interpreted. This means we must learn how to ask **theoretical questions** concerned with *why* things happen the way they do. Some

sociologists work primarily on empirical questions, but unless their research is guided by some knowledge of theory their findings are unlikely to be particularly illuminating (see table 2.1). At the same time, sociologists do not pursue theoretical knowledge for its own sake, as this runs the risk of falling into pure speculation far removed from the evidence. Reliable sociological knowledge is essentially theoretical-empirical in character. The combination of empirical research alongside theorizing is a key defining characteristic of all scientific disciplines, and sociology is no exception.

What is 'science' anyway?

In the early nineteenth century, Auguste Comte described sociology as an emerging science that should adopt the successful methods of the natural sciences such as physics and chemistry. Durkheim, Marx and other founders also saw sociology as a scientific subject, but today many sociologists are not so sure. Can social life be studied in a scientific way? Should it be? Are Laud Humphreys' observations on the tearooms scientific, and what is 'science' anyway? Perhaps surprisingly there is no simple or agreed answer to that last question. The best way to understand why is to take a whistle-stop tour of key arguments from studies in the philosophy and history of science, which should help us to understand the academic status of sociology.

Imprisonment of offenders is common across many societies, but to understand how similar or different these are requires comparative empirical studies of penal regimes.

Table 2.1 The sociologist's line of questioning

Factual question	What happened?	It is reported that some men in China use dating apps to find male sexual partners.
Comparative question	Did this happen everywhere?	Is this a widespread phenomenon, or is it occurring only in China? Is the behaviour restricted to self-identifying gay men?
Developmental question	Has this happened over time?	What methods have men used in the past to find male sexual partners? Are they essentially similar to or different from the use of dating apps?
Theoretical question	What underlies this phenomenon?	Why are men now using apps rather than older methods? What factors should we look at that might explain this changing behaviour?

In chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', Comte argued that the positive stage of human knowledge produces reliable, valid knowledge that would, ultimately, enable progressive interventions into nature and society. Science is superior to all previous routes to knowledge and a prerequisite for development in the modern world. For Comte, science is an essentially unitary endeavour. That is, all scientific subjects use a similar method, which means that the social and natural sciences are not fundamentally different. Science begins with observation and the collection of data, then proceeds to look for patterns within the observed facts, before moving on to develop general theories which provide explanations of the evidence. This 'ground-up' process of research is known as induction. However, Comte's argument is rooted in a rather idealized picture of science that is not based on the actual practice of scientists. From the early twentieth century, this inductive description of science began to be overturned.

Positivism and the philosophy of science

In 1920s Austria, an influential group of philosophers, known as the Vienna Circle, set out important modifications to Comte's positivist position. In particular, they tried to clarify what counts as 'science' and why the statements scientists make about the world can be accepted as 'true'. They focused on logic and deductive reasoning rather than simple induction and their approach was described as logical positivism. This recognized that scientists do not go around collecting data and later try to explain what they find (inductive method). Rather, they *begin* by formulating hypotheses – clearly framed questions or statements about some aspect of reality – and then set out to collect empirical evidence that will verify these (hypothetico-deductive method). To be scientifically valid, they argued, scientific statements and theories always have to be tested against evidence. This is unlike other forms of 'knowledge'. For example, it is just not possible to say that any particular moral standpoint on poverty or an aesthetic judgement about what is beautiful is 'true', however much we debate these subjects. Statements in these fields do not uncover truths about the world and are therefore scientifically meaningless.

Logical positivists adopt a correspondence theory of truth which accepts statements as true only where they 'correspond' exactly with what exists in the real world. Hence the key to valid knowledge is empirical verification, and it is the job of scientists constantly to seek out evidence which supports their statements. Logical positivism was highly influential in defining what constitutes a scientific approach to knowledge. But by the late 1930s its central principle of verification was under attack.

Sir Karl Popper (1902–94), a former member of the Vienna Circle, provided the most systematic critique of logical positivism. Popper argued that verification is not a powerful principle, as almost any theory, however unrealistic, can find *some* evidence that supports its arguments. Verification can never definitively settle theoretical disputes. A much stronger principle is *disconfirmation*. Broad theories should lead to hypotheses which are, in principle at least, capable of being falsified. Scientists then actively seek out cases that disconfirm or falsify their own hypotheses. In this way, one disconfirming case can tell

us much more about the world than thousands of instances of verification ever could (Delanty 1997: 31–2). For instance, we may hypothesize that 'all swans are white' and set out to verify this statement. Yet, however many white swans we observe, the hypothesis can never be proved true because non-white swans *might* still exist. But we need to find just a single black swan in order conclusively to falsify our hypothesis and find a simple truth about the world – not all swans are white.

a.bacall

"As a professor I can tell you that only a fool thinks he's always right. There's no doubt in my mind that I'm right about that."

CartoonStock.com

Karl Popper saw Marxism and Freudian psychoanalysis as unscientific because they offer no criteria for falsification. No amount of verification makes for a solid scientific theory – for instance, no matter how many white swans a researcher might find, it does not rule out the possibility of the existence of a black swan.

Popper suggests that the best hypotheses are not cautious ones but 'bold conjectures' which offer the potential for significant knowledge gains. Yet most scientific knowledge is never accepted as universally 'true' as it is always open (potentially) to being falsified. In fifty years' time all black swans may have died out, making our accepted truth about swans (they're not all white) incorrect. All we can say is that the currently accepted scientific theories and explanations are the best we have because they have not been conclusively falsified – yet. This might appear to be a weak description of science that is at odds with widespread, common-sense ideas of science as producing hard facts and universal laws of nature, but the 'open' character of scientific knowledge and the open-mindedness of scientists are both crucial to Popper's vision. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, detailed work by historians of science called Popper's version of science into question.

Lessons from the history of science

Probably the most important critique of Popper's model of science as an open enterprise remains Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn was less interested in what philosophers thought science *should* be like and more concerned with what we can learn from the actual history and development of science and its theories. He argued that the history of the natural sciences shows that scientists tend to work within the overall assumptions of a particular theoretical framework – a paradigm – such as Newtonian mechanics in physics, which led scientists accurately to calculate planetary orbits and much more throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Scientists become committed to expanding 'their' paradigm and practised a problem-solving form of 'normal science', which expands the evidence base of the paradigm and teaches its assumptions to new scientists without ever seriously challenging it. Normal science, says Kuhn, accounts for the bulk of all scientific work.

Over time, anomalous findings occur that just do not 'fit' into the existing paradigm. In the case of Newtonian mechanics, a crucial failure was the paradigm's inability to explain the movement of light. Yet, rather than leading to challenges to the existing paradigm, scientists may instead query the data or the experiments that produced them. In short, while Popper expected scientists to work in an open-minded way, Kuhn found that, in practice, they resolutely defended their paradigms, dismissing contrary evidence and shaking off quite legitimate challenges (Benton and Craib 2001: 58–61). Why would they do this? The answer is a sociological one. Science is not an isolated enterprise but takes place within communities of scholars with a shared interest in defending the paradigms within which they have built careers and reputations and earned high status.

Kuhn argues that, at key moments, younger scientists, less bound into and committed to a specific paradigm, work on emerging anomalies and, in order to account for them, are led to devise new theories and build alternative paradigms. In the early twentieth century, a revolutionary new theory was developed – Einstein's theory of relativity – which had a satisfactory explanation for the motion of light. The new theory became the centre of a new paradigm, which enabled 'normal science' to proceed again (Weinberg 1998). Kuhn calls this move a period of 'revolutionary science', when there is a real possibility of a paradigm shift. But this is not the kind of cumulative scientific progress Popper had in mind. Kuhn is at pains to point out that, even where a new paradigm develops, this is not because the old one had been conclusively falsified. Old and new paradigms are usually incommensurate; they just cannot be compared. Instead, as more and more scientists become attracted to the new paradigm, the old one simply withers away for lack of interest. On this account, scientific practice diverges radically from all the pure methodologies proposed by philosophers.

An even more radical position was taken by Paul Feyerabend, who was interested in how the most significant scientific discoveries came about. The philosophy of science suggests that these ought to be the outcome of strict adherence to proper scientific methods and years of painstaking research. However, Feyerabend argues that this is not the

case. In fact, the episodes he describes most often came about by chance or when scientists deviated from established scientific practice, or even by laypeople making discoveries outside the scientific community altogether. In the appropriately titled book *Against Method* (1975), he concludes, contrary to all philosophical notions of science as both method and form of logic, history shows us that there is only one proven methodological principle: 'anything goes'. Scientific discoveries have been made in all sorts of ways, and forcing researchers to stick to one set of rules stunts rather than encourages progress.

Scientific sociology?

What do the debates on the nature of science tell us about the scientific status of sociology? First, science cannot be defined by any one method or a fixed set of methodological rules. In practice, scientists adopt a variety of methods in their pursuit of knowledge. Pawson (2013: xi) argues that:

> If science was merely a matter of routine and compunction, of compliance and rule following, it would be pre-programmed – done already or awaiting completion in the pipeline. In reality, scientific research undergoes constant change as fresh discoveries are made and new fields open up. Accordingly, methodological rules cannot be carved in stone … Each time the researcher dreams up a project, responds to a tender, enters the field, draws conclusions, makes observations and pens a paper, that individual will seed minute modifications to the methodological rules.

Pawson's argument applies to both natural and social sciences, though he does not accept Feyerabend's anarchistic conclusion. Instead, he argues that methodological rules *are* always in a process of development, but they are not irrelevant altogether.

Second, although there is no single scientific method or methodological principle (which was sought by philosophers), science does involve certain key elements, including theoretical thinking, the logical assessment of arguments, systematic empirical investigation, rigorous analysis of data, and a commitment to publish research findings to develop a cumulative body of knowledge. This means that the social

disciplines, sociology and psychology among them, must be considered scientific because both quantitative and qualitative research involves all of these elements.

However, third, we should not expect sociologists to adopt *exactly* the same methods of investigation as the natural sciences. This is because people, social groups and societies are, in significant ways, very different from the other animals and events in the physical world. In particular, humans are self-aware beings who confer meaning and purpose on what they do. We cannot even *describe* social life accurately unless we first grasp the meanings that people apply to their actions. For instance, to describe a death as a 'suicide' means knowing what the person in question was intending when they died. If a person steps in front of a car and is killed, objective observation may suggest suicide, but this can only be established if we know that their action was not accidental. Intention and meaning are crucial explanatory features of human action, which sociologists cannot ignore if their accounts are to be valid.

"I'm a social scientist, Michael. That means I can't explain electricity or anything like that, but if you ever want to know about people I'm the man."

Fourth, in acknowledging this significant difference between the social and natural sciences, it may appear that sociologists are at a distinct disadvantage. Trying to 'get inside the mind' of an individual is notoriously problematic and seems like an additional complication. Yet there may be a major benefit. Sociologists are able to ask questions directly of those they study – other human beings – and get responses they and other researchers understand. Biologists, for instance, have no such direct communication with the animals whose behaviour they try to interpret. The opportunity to converse with research participants who can confirm or criticize the researcher's explanations means that sociological findings are, potentially, more *reliable* (different researchers would arrive at the same results) and *valid* (the research actually measures what it is supposed to) than many in the natural sciences.

At the same time, studying human beings brings problems that do not trouble natural scientists. People who are aware that their activities are being scrutinized may alter their usual behaviour and opinions, thus invalidating the researcher's conclusions. Participants may consciously or unconsciously manage the presentation of their self and even try to 'assist' the researcher by providing the responses they think are being sought. Sociologists must be aware of these problems and devise strategies to counter them. Scientists studying the behaviour of chemicals or frogs do not have to deal with this additional problem.

To conclude, we can agree with philosophers of science that there are criteria which distinguish scientific work from other types of inquiry, though these criteria are not fixed but change over time, alongside ongoing research programmes and studies. We can also agree with historians that science takes place within communities and broad theoretical frameworks or paradigms. Sociology has moved forward through competitive struggles between rival perspectives and, over time, the number of perspectives and theoretical syntheses has increased. Yet, in spite of this variety and competition, and against the anarchist position taken by Feyerabend, there remains a logic to the research process that is common across the majority of sociological studies, and this is outlined in the next section.

The research process

Carrying out research in sociology involves a number of steps, leading from identifying a research problem and devising a methodology right through to publishing the findings and responding to criticisms from colleagues (see figure 2.1). However, all research begins with the desire to know or better understand some aspect of the social world.

Defining the problem

All research starts from a problem or question. This is sometimes an area of factual ignorance: we may simply wish to improve our knowledge about certain institutions, social processes or cultures. A researcher might set out to answer questions such as 'What proportion of the population today holds strong religious beliefs?' or 'How far does the economic position of women still lag behind that of men?' Such questions are necessary and useful.

However, the best sociological research begins with problems that are also puzzles. A puzzle is not just a lack of information but a *gap in our understanding*. Much of the skill in producing worthwhile sociological research consists in correctly identifying puzzles. Rather than simply answering the question 'What is going on here?', puzzle-solving research tries to contribute to our understanding of *why* events happen as they do. Thus we might ask: 'What accounts for the decline in the proportion of the population voting in elections in recent years?' 'Why are women poorly represented in high-status jobs?' These questions

are not simple factual questions but require us to go a stage further to provide *explanations* for the evidence we find.

It is important to remember that no piece of research stands alone. Research problems arise as part of ongoing work, and one research project may easily lead to another because it raises issues the researcher had not previously considered. A sociologist may also discover puzzles by reading the work of other researchers in books and professional journals or by being aware of trends in society.

Reviewing existing evidence

Once the problem is identified, the next step is usually to review the available evidence in a particular field through a review of the existing literature. It could be that previous research has already satisfactorily answered our question and there is no need to repeat the process. But, if not, the sociologist will need to sift through whatever research does exist to see how useful it is for their purpose. Have previous researchers spotted the same puzzle? How have they tried to solve it? What aspects of the problem have their studies left unanalysed? Drawing upon others' ideas helps the sociologist to clarify the issues that might be raised and the methods that might be used in their own research. Reviewing the literature is an essential step that helps to avoid unnecessary duplication and repetition, and it can also point out where gaps in our knowledge still exist.

Making the problem precise

A third stage involves working out a clear formulation of the problem. If relevant literature already exists, the researcher might return from the library with a good idea of how the problem should be approached. Hunches about the nature of the problem can sometimes be turned into research questions, which, though rooted in an educated guess about what is going on, clearly state this in precise language. If the study is to be effective, research questions must be formulated in such a way that the empirical material gathered will provide evidence that either supports or challenges them. Studies involving the collection and analysis of numerical data, such as social surveys, tend to favour statistical testing as a method of verifying or falsifying clearly stated

hypotheses, while qualitative research will often be exploratory in character and allow research questions to emerge during the research process.

Working out a design

The researcher must then decide just how the research materials are to be collected. A range of different research methods exists, and which one is chosen depends on the overall objective of the study, as well as on which aspects of behaviour are to be analysed. For some purposes, a social survey (in which questionnaires are normally used) might be suitable, especially where we need to gather a large quantity of data. In other circumstances, if we want to study small social groups in great detail, interviews or an observational study might be more appropriate. We shall learn more about these and other research methods later in this chapter.

Conducting the research

At the point of proceeding with the research, unforeseen practical difficulties can crop up, and very often do. For example, it might prove impossible to contact some of those to whom questionnaires are to be sent or those people the researcher wishes to interview. A business firm or school may be unwilling to let the researcher carry out the work they had planned due to concerns about sensitive information being leaked. Difficulties such as this could result in bias, as the researcher may be able to gain access only to a partial sample, which subsequently leads to a false overall result. For example, if the researcher is studying how business corporations have complied with equal opportunities programmes for disabled people, companies that have not complied may not want to be studied, but omitting them will result in a systematic bias in the study's findings.
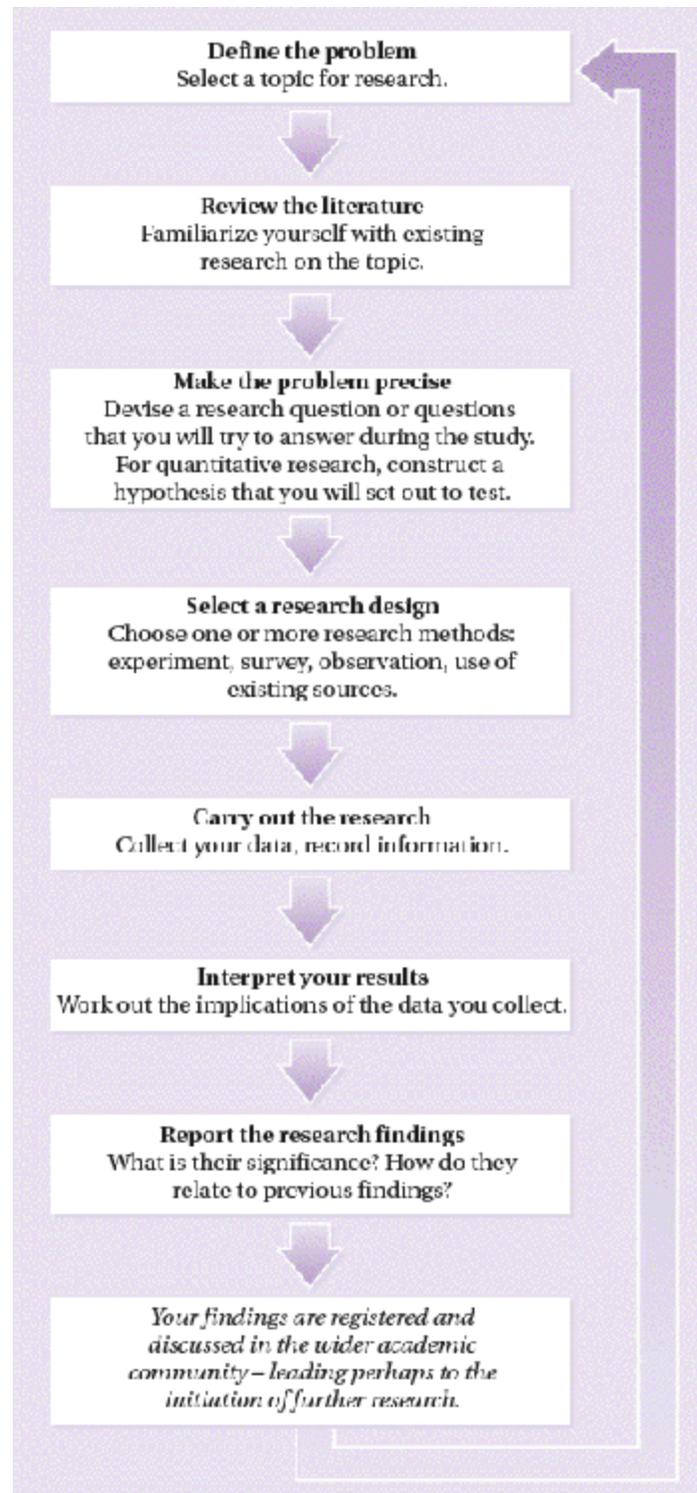
Figure 2.1 Steps in the research process

DOONESBURY   by Garry Trudeau

Bias can enter the research process in other ways too. For example, if a study is based on a survey of participants' views, the researcher may, even unwittingly, push the discussion in a particular direction, asking leading questions that follow their own viewpoint (as the Doonesbury cartoon shows). Alternatively, interviewees may evade a question that they just do not want to answer. The use of questionnaires with fixed wording can help to reduce interview bias, but it will not eliminate it entirely. Another source of bias occurs when *potential* participants in a survey, such as a distributed voluntary questionnaire, decide that they do not want to take part. This is known as *non-response bias*, and, as a general rule, the higher the proportion of non-responses in the sample, the more likely it is that the survey of those who *do* take part will be skewed. Even if every attempt is made to reduce bias in surveys, the observations that sociologists make in carrying out a piece of research are likely to reflect their own cultural assumptions. This *observer bias* can be difficult and perhaps even impossible to eliminate, as sociologists – believe it or not – are human beings and members of societies as well as sociologists! Later in this chapter we look at some of the other pitfalls and difficulties of sociological research and discuss how these can be avoided.

Interpreting and reporting the findings

Once the material has been gathered together for analysis, the researcher's troubles are not over. Working out the implications of the data and relating these back to the research problem are rarely easy. While it may be possible to reach a clear answer to the initial questions, many investigations are, in the end, less than fully conclusive. The

research findings, usually published in a report, journal article or book, provide an account of the nature of the research and seek to justify whatever conclusions are drawn. This is a final stage only in terms of the individual project. Most reports also indicate questions that remain unanswered and suggest further research that might profitably be done in the future. All individual investigations are part of the continuing process of research which takes place within the international sociological community.

The preceding sequence of steps is a simplified version of what happens in actual research projects (see figure 2.1). In real-world research, these stages rarely succeed each other so neatly and there is almost always a certain amount of 'muddling through'. The difference is a bit like that between following a recipe in a cookbook and the actual process of cooking a meal. People who are experienced cooks often do not work from recipes at all, yet their food may be better than that cooked by those who do. As Feyerabend saw, following a rigid set of stages can be unduly restrictive, and many outstanding pieces of sociological research have not followed this strict sequence. Still, most of the steps discussed above would be in there somewhere.

Understanding cause and effect

One of the main problems to be tackled in research methods is the analysis of cause and effect, especially in quantitative research which is based on statistical testing. A causal relationship between two events or situations is an association in which one event or situation produces another. If the handbrake is released in a car that is parked on a hill, the car will roll down the incline, gathering speed progressively as it does so. Taking the brake off was the immediate cause of this event, and the reasons for it can readily be understood by reference to the physical principles involved. Like natural science, sociology depends on the assumption that all events have causes. Social life is *not* a random array of occurrences. One of the main tasks of sociological research and theorizing is to identify causes and effects.

Causation and correlation

Causation cannot be directly inferred from correlation. Correlation means the existence of a regular relationship between two sets of occurrences or variables. A variable is any dimension along which individuals or groups vary. Age, gender, ethnicity, income and social class position are among the many variables that sociologists study. It might seem, when two variables are found to be closely linked, or correlated, that one must be the cause of the other. Yet this is very often *not* the case. Many correlations exist without any corresponding causal relationship between the variables involved. For example, over the period since the Second World War, a strong correlation can be found between the decline in pipe-smoking and the decrease in the number of people who regularly go to the cinema. Clearly one change does not cause the other, and we would find it difficult to discover even a remote causal connection between them. There are other instances in which it is not quite so obvious that an observed correlation does not imply a causal relationship. Such correlations are traps for the unwary and easily lead to questionable or false conclusions.

In his classic work of 1897, *Suicide* (discussed in <u>chapter 1</u>), Emile Durkheim found a correlation between rates of suicide and the seasons of the year. Levels of suicide increased progressively from January to around June or July and then declined over the remainder of the year. It might be supposed that temperature or climatic change is *causally related* to the propensity of individuals to commit suicide. We might surmise that, as temperatures increase, people become more impulsive and hot-headed, leading to higher suicide rates. However, the causal relationship here has nothing to do *directly* with temperature or climate at all. In spring and summer, most people engage in a more intensive social life than they do in the winter months. Those who are isolated or unhappy tend to experience an intensification of these feelings as the activity level of other people around them rises. Hence they are likely to experience acute suicidal tendencies more in the spring and summer than they do in autumn and winter, when the pace of social activity slackens. We always have to be on our guard, both in assessing whether correlation involves causation and in deciding in which direction causal relations run.

Causal mechanisms

Working out the causal connections involved in identified correlations is often difficult. For instance, there is a strong correlation in modern societies between level of educational achievement and occupational success. The better the grades an individual gets in school, the better paid the job they are likely to get when they leave. What explains this correlation? Research tends to show that it is not formal schooling in itself; levels of educational attainment are influenced much more by the type of home from which the person comes. Children from better-off homes, whose parents take a strong interest in their learning, where books are abundant and a place to study exists, are more likely to do well than those from lowerincome groups where these aspects may not be available. The causal mechanisms here are the facilities that parents are able to provide for their children to study.

Causal connections in sociology should not be understood in too mechanical a way. The attitudes people have and their subjective reasons for acting as they do are causal factors in relationships between

variables in social life, and qualitative research is required if we are to gain the kind of in-depth understanding of how individuals interpret their world. Max Weber (1979 [1925]: 13) was clear that sociological work should be explicable at this individual and interactional level, which is where the meaningfulness of social life is produced.

A discussion of some recent 'critical realist' approaches which focus on establishing causal mechanisms in social life can be found in chapter 5, 'The Environment'.

Controls

In quantitative research, assessing the cause or causes that explain a correlation usually involves distinguishing independent from dependent variables. An independent variable is one that produces an effect on another variable. The variable affected is called the dependent variable. In the example above, academic achievement is the independent variable and occupational income the dependent variable. The distinction refers to the direction of the causal relation. However, the same factor may be an independent variable in one study and a dependent variable in another. It depends on what causal processes are being analysed. If we were looking at the effects of differences in occupational income on people's lifestyles, then occupational income would be the independent rather than the dependent variable.

To find out whether a correlation between variables is a causal connection, we can use controls, which means we hold some variables constant in order to look at the effects of others. By doing this, we are able to judge between explanations of observed correlations, separating causal from non-causal relationships. For example, medical researchers studying smoking behaviour may suggest that vaping via e-cigarettes leads to a reduction in conventional tobacco smoking in young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four – that there is a causal

connection between e-cigarette use and smoking cessation. To find out, we could gather a sample of conventional smokers in this age group and assign them randomly into two groups: an experimental group that is given e-cigarettes and a control group that is not. After the study period, we would measure tobacco-smoking activity in the two groups; if the experimental group smokes less than the control group after their experience with e-cigarettes, we may attribute the reduction to the latter.

This is a simplified example to illustrate the principle of using control groups in variable analysis, but in reality things can be more messy and complex than is suggested here. Was it really vaping that caused the reduction in tobacco smoking? Could it be that, during the research process, positive praise for trying to stop smoking received from friends and family was the strongest factor?

Identifying causes

An example of how difficult it can be to establish causal relations involved in a correlation is given by the long history of studies of smoking and lung cancer. Research has consistently demonstrated a strong correlation between these two. Smokers are more likely to contract lung cancer than non-smokers, and very heavy smokers are more likely to do so than light smokers. The correlation can also be expressed the other way around. A high proportion of those who have lung cancer are smokers or have smoked for long periods in the past. There have been so many studies confirming these correlations that today it is generally accepted that a causal link is involved, but the *exact* causal mechanism is thus far largely unknown.

Researchers may want to know why some young Muslims in the UK wear headscarves while others do not. However, it can be difficult to establish a causal relationship between the various factors involved.

However much correlational work is done on any issue, there always remains some doubt about the possible causal relationship. Other interpretations of the correlation are at least theoretically possible. It has been proposed, for instance, that people who are predisposed to lung cancer are also predisposed to smoke. On this view, what causes lung cancer is not smoking *per se* but, rather, some in-built biological disposition to both smoking and cancer. Identifying causal relationships is normally guided by previous research into the subject at hand. If we do not have some reasonable idea beforehand of the causal mechanisms involved in a correlation, we would probably find it very difficult to discover what the real causal connections are. In short, we would not know what to test *for*.

Sociological research methods

A common distinction is often made in sociology between quantitative and qualitative research methods and traditions. The former are associated with functionalism and positivism, the latter with interactionism and the search for meanings and understanding. As the term suggests, quantitative methods try to *measure* social phenomena and will use mathematical models and, often, statistical analysis to explain them. Qualitative methods attempt to gather detailed, rich data, allowing for an in-depth understanding of individual actions within the context of social life. As a rough-and-ready guide to a diverse range of sociological research methods, this distinction is a useful starting point. Many sociologists do tend to specialize or even favour one tradition over the other. However, there is a danger that the two traditions will be seen as opposing 'camps' with entirely different approaches to research. This would not be very productive, nor does it adequately describe the situation that exists.

In fact, many research projects use mixed methods – both quantitative and qualitative – in order to gain a more comprehensive and rounded understanding of the subject being studied. The findings from separate quantitative and qualitative studies can also be combined. For example, some feminist sociologists favour qualitative methods, which, they argue, allow the authentic voices of women to be heard in ways that quantitative studies just cannot match. This latter point is undoubtedly correct. But without quantitative studies it would not have been possible to measure the full extent of gender inequality in society or to set those individual women's voices into a wider societal context. Sociologists have to be prepared to use the most appropriate methods for the specific questions they want to answer.

Next, we look at some of the various research methods sociologists commonly employ in their work (see table 2.2).

Ethnography

The approaches of both Laud Humphreys and Li and his colleagues in China were forms of ethnography, a type of fieldwork, or first-hand study of people, using participant observation and/or interviews as the main research methods. Here, the investigator hangs out, works or lives with a group, organization or community and sometimes plays a direct part in their activities.

Where it is successful, ethnography provides information on the behaviour of people in groups, organizations and communities as well as on how those people understand their own behaviour. Once we see how things look from inside a given group, we can gain a better understanding, not only of that group but also of social processes that transcend the situation under study. Ethnography is one of a number of qualitative research methods used in sociology that aim to gain an in-depth knowledge and understanding of relatively small-scale social phenomena.

In the traditional works of ethnography, accounts were presented without much information about the researchers themselves being included, as it was thought that an ethnographer could present objective accounts of the societies they studied. In more recent years, ethnographers have increasingly discussed themselves and the nature of their connection to the people under study. Sometimes this reflexivity might be a matter of trying to consider how one's own ethnicity, class or gender has influenced or affected the work, or how the power differences between observer and observed have impacted on the dialogue between them.

Table 2.2 Four widely used methods in sociological research

Research method	Strengths	Limitations
Fieldwork	Usually generates richer and more in-depth information than other methods.	Only successful with smaller groups or communities.
	Ethnography can provide a better understanding of social processes.	Findings might apply only to the groups studied. Not easy to generalize on the basis of a single fieldwork study.
Surveys	Make possible the efficient collection of data on large numbers of people.	The material gathered may be superficial; where a questionnaire is highly standardized, important differences between respondents' viewpoints may be glossed over.
	Allow for precise comparisons to be made between the answers of respondents.	Responses may be what people profess to believe rather than what they actually believe.
Experiments	The influence of specific variables can be controlled by the investigator.	Many aspects of social life cannot be brought into the laboratory.
	Are usually easier for subsequent researchers to repeat.	The responses of those studied may be affected by their experimental situation.

Research method	Strengths	Limitations
Documentary research	Can provide source of in-depth materials as well as data on large numbers, depending on the type of documents studied.	The researcher is dependent on the sources that exist, which may be partial.
	Is often essential when a study is either wholly historical or has a defined historical dimension.	The sources may be difficult to interpret in terms of how far they represent real tendencies, as in the case of some official statistics.

Ethnographic studies do have limitations. Only fairly small groups or communities can be studied, and much depends on the skill of the individual researcher in gaining the confidence of the people involved. Without this skill the research is unlikely to get off the ground at all. The reverse is also possible. A researcher could begin to identify so closely with the group that he or she becomes too much of an 'insider' and loses the perspective of an outside observer. When so much rests on the skills of a particular individual, the study becomes hard to reproduce and thus the reliability of the findings may be called into question.

Sociologists also make use of [focus groups](), previously the preserve of marketing agencies and opinion pollsters. Focus groups are essentially facilitated 'group discussions' in which a small group of specifically selected individuals are gathered together to discuss a subject and exchange views. The researcher acts as moderator but also asks specific questions relating to the research study in order to direct the discussion. Because of their interactive and flexible nature, focus groups allow possible misunderstandings to be clarified, thereby increasing the validity of findings. However, critics point out that the researcher in a focus group is more participant than detached observer

and may well influence the responses. There is therefore a danger that participants will perform according to the researcher's expectations, though this issue is not unique to the focus group method and is something that all researchers have to consider.

Snapshots

"I love our lunches out here, but I always get the feeling that we're being watched."

Surveys

Interpreting field studies usually involves problems of generalization. Since only a small number of people are studied, we cannot be sure that what is found in one context will apply in another, or even that two researchers would come to the same conclusions when studying the same group. This is less of a problem in large-scale survey research. In a survey, questionnaires may be sent out or administered directly in interviews to a selected group of people – sometimes several thousand. Sociologists refer to this group of people, whatever its size, as a sample.

While ethnographic work is well suited to in-depth studies of small slices of social life, survey research tends to produce information that is less detailed but can be applied over a broader area. Surveys are the most widely used type of quantitative research method, allowing social phenomena to be measured and then analysed using mathematical models and statistical techniques. Many government bodies and private polling agencies make extensive use of surveys to gain knowledge of people's attitudes and creating an accurate picture of the shape, size and diversity of a society's population would be quite impossible without such survey research.

Sampling

Often sociologists are interested in the characteristics of large numbers of individuals – for example, the political attitudes of the population of Australia. It would be impossible to involve all 25 million people directly, so in such situations researchers engage in sampling – concentrating on a small proportion – a sample – of this overall population. One can usually be confident that the results from a population sample, as long as it is properly chosen, can be generalized to the total population. Studies of only 2,000 to 3,000 voters, for instance, can give a very accurate indication of the attitudes and voting intentions of the entire population. But, to achieve such accuracy, a sample must be representative – that is, the group of individuals studied must be typical of the population as a whole. Representative sampling is more complex than it may appear, and statisticians have developed rules for working out the correct size and nature of samples.

A particularly important procedure used to ensure that a sample is representative is random sampling, in which a sample is chosen so that

every member of the population has the same probability of being included. The most sophisticated way of obtaining a random sample is to give each member of the population a number and then use a computer to generate a random list from which the sample is derived – for instance, by picking every tenth number.

In fieldwork, researchers have to get close to the communities they are studying, but not so close that they lose their relatively detached sociological eye.

There are other types of sampling used by sociologists. In some types of research, it may be necessary to use convenience sampling. This means taking your sample from wherever you can! Because convenience sampling is less systematic and rigorous than other types, the results it generates have to be treated with caution. Nonetheless, in applied research or studies of hard-to-reach social groups who may be reluctant to come forward – for example, substance users or people who self-harm – it may be the only practical way of gathering an adequate sample. Without convenience sampling, the voices of some social groups may just not get heard. Similarly, snowball sampling, in which existing participants are used to recruit other participants via

their own network of contacts and friends, is a tried and tested method of gaining access to a larger sample than would otherwise be possible.

Advantages and disadvantages of surveys

There are several reasons why surveys are used in sociology. Responses to questionnaires can more easily be quantified and analysed than material generated by most other research methods. Large numbers of people can be studied and, given sufficient funds, researchers can employ an agency specializing in survey work to collect the responses. This kind of research is a model of quantitative research, as surveys give researchers a statistical measure of the phenomenon they are studying.

Many sociologists today, however, are critical of the survey method. They argue that an *appearance* of precision can be given to findings whose accuracy may be dubious, given the relatively shallow nature of most survey responses. Levels of non-response can be high, especially when questionnaires are sent and returned through the mail, which can compromise the survey's representativeness. It is not uncommon for studies to be published based on results derived from little over half of those in the sample, although efforts are usually made to re-contact non-respondents or to substitute them with other people. Little is known about those who choose not to respond to surveys or refuse to be interviewed, though survey research is often experienced as intrusive and timeconsuming. Despite these problems, the social survey remains one important method in the sociologist's armoury.

The questionnaire – standardized or open-ended?

Three types of questionnaire are used in surveys. Some contain a standardized, or fixed-choice, set of questions, to which only a given range of responses is possible – for instance, '*Yes/No/Don't know*' or '*Very likely/Likely/Unlikely/Very unlikely*'. Standardized questionnaires have the advantage that responses are easy to count and compare, since only a small number of categories is involved. On the other hand, because they do not allow for subtleties of opinion or verbal expression, the information they yield is likely to be restricted in scope and can sometimes be misleading.

Other questionnaires are open-ended, giving respondents more opportunity to express their views in their own words rather than limiting them to fixed-choice responses. Open-ended questionnaires typically provide more detailed information than standardized ones. On the other hand, the lack of standardization means that responses are likely to be more difficult to compare statistically, and this limits attempts to draw general conclusions from the study.

Questionnaire items are normally listed so that a team of interviewers can ask the questions and record responses in the same predetermined order, and all the items must be readily understandable to interviewers and interviewees alike. In the large national surveys undertaken regularly by government agencies and private research organizations, interviews are carried out more or less simultaneously across the whole country. Those who conduct the interviews and those who analyse the results could not do their work effectively if they constantly had to check with each other about ambiguities in the questions or answers.

Questionnaires should also take into consideration the characteristics of respondents. Will they see the point the researcher has in mind in asking a particular question? Have they enough information to provide an answer? Will they be able to answer at all? The terms and concepts used in a questionnaire might be unfamiliar to the respondents. For instance, the question 'What is your marital status?' might baffle some people, and it would be more appropriate to ask, 'Are you single, married, separated, or divorced?' Most surveys are preceded by pilot studies in which just a few people complete a questionnaire in order to pick up such ambiguities and iron out problems that may not be anticipated by the investigator before the main survey is carried out.

Experiments

An experiment is an attempt to test a hypothesis under highly controlled conditions established by the investigator. Experiments are commonplace in the natural sciences and psychology, as they offer major advantages over other research procedures. In an experimental situation the researcher directly controls the circumstances under

study. Psychologists examining individual behaviour use laboratorybased experimentation extensively. However, in comparison with these disciplines, the scope for experimentation in sociology is severely restricted. Most sociological studies, even those of individual actions, look to investigate the relationship between micro- and macrosocial phenomena. To remove individuals from their social context for the purposes of experimentation would make little, if any, sense to many researchers.

Yet, sometimes sociologists want to explore group dynamics – the way individuals behave when in groups – and experiments may then be feasible. Even so, only small groups can be brought into a laboratory setting, and in such experiments people know they are being studied and may behave differently. Such changes in the behaviour of research subjects are referred to as the 'Hawthorne effect'. In the 1930s, researchers conducting productivity studies at the Western Electric Company's Hawthorne plant near Chicago found to their surprise that worker productivity continued to rise regardless of which experimental conditions they imposed (levels of lighting, break patterns, work team size, and so on). Workers were conscious of being under scrutiny and accelerated their normal work pace, thereby undermining the experiments. Nevertheless, as 'Classic studies' 2.1 shows, it is possible to learn things about social life from small-scale experiments in social psychology.

Biographical research

In contrast to experiments, biographical research belongs purely to the social sciences and has no place in the natural sciences. Biographical research has become increasingly popular in sociology over recent decades and includes oral histories, narratives, autobiographies, biographies and life histories (Bryman 2015). These methods are used to explore how individuals experience social life and periods of social change and how they interpret their relationships with others in the context of a changing world. In this way, biographical methods allow new voices to enter sociological research, and life histories are a good example.

Life histories consist of biographical material assembled about particular individuals, usually as recalled by the individuals themselves. Life histories have been successfully employed in sociological studies of major importance. One celebrated early study was *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, by W. I. Thomas and Florian Znaniecki, the five volumes of which were published between 1918 and 1920 (Thomas and Znaniecki 1966). Thomas and Znaniecki were able to provide a more sensitive and subtle account of the experience of migration than would have been possible without the interviews, letters and newspaper articles they collected. Biographical research aims to give us a feel for how life is experienced, something that can never be achieved by large-scale surveys and statistical testing. Other methods do not usually yield as much information about the development of beliefs and attitudes over time. Life-history studies rarely rely wholly on people's memories. Normally, other sources such as letters, contemporary reports and newspaper descriptions are used to expand on and check the validity of the information that individuals provide.

Sociologists' views differ on the value of biographical methods. Some feel they are too unreliable and subjective to provide useful information, but others see that they offer sources of insight that few other research methods can match. Indeed, some sociologists have begun to offer reflections on their own lives within their research studies as a way of offering insights into the origins and development of their own theoretical assumptions (see, for example, Mouzelis 1995).

Comparative and historical research

Comparative research is of central importance in sociology, because making comparisons allows us to clarify what is going on in a particular area of social life. Take the rate of divorce among opposite-sex couples in many developed societies as an example. In the early 1960s there were fewer than 30,000 divorces per year in England and Wales, but by 2003 this figure had risen to 153,000. However, since 2003 the annual number of divorces has been falling, and in 2017 it stood at 101,669. The *divorce rate* also fell, to 8.4 divorcing persons per 1,000 married population, the lowest level since 1973 (ONS 2018a). Do these changes reflect specific features of British society? We can find out by

comparing divorce rates in the UK with those of other countries. Comparison with figures for other Western societies reveals that the overall trends are in fact quite similar. A majority of Western countries experienced steadily climbing divorce rates over the latter part of the twentieth century, which appear to have peaked early in the twenty-first century before stabilizing or falling back in recent years. What we may conclude is that the statistics for England and Wales are part of a broader trend or pattern across modernized Western societies.

[Classic studies 2.1](#) The social psychology of prison life

The research problem

Most people have not experienced life in prison and find it hard to imagine how they would cope 'inside'. How would you fare? What kind of prison officer would you be – a disciplinarian maybe? Or perhaps you would adopt a more humanitarian approach to your prisoners? In 1971, a research team led by Philip Zimbardo decided to try and find out what impact the prison environment would have on 'ordinary people'.

In a study funded by the US Navy, Zimbardo set out to test the 'dispositional hypothesis', which dominated within the armed forces. This hypothesis suggested that constant conflicts between prisoners and guards were a result of the conflicting individual characters of the guards and inmates – their personal dispositions. Zimbardo thought this might be wrong and set up an experimental prison to find out.

Zimbardo's explanation

Zimbardo's research team set up an imitation jail at Stanford University, advertised for male volunteers to participate in a study of prison life, and selected twenty-four mainly middle-class students who did not know one another. Each participant was randomly assigned a role as either a guard or a prisoner. Following a standard induction process, which involved being stripped, de-loused and photographed naked, prisoners stayed in jail for twenty-four hours a day, but the guards worked shifts and went home afterwards. Standardized uniforms were used for both roles (Haney et al. 1973). The aim was to see how playing the different roles would lead to changes in attitude and behaviour. What followed shocked the investigators.

Students who played the part of guards quickly assumed an authoritarian manner, displaying real hostility towards prisoners,

ordering them around, verbally abusing and bullying them. The prisoners, by contrast, showed a mixture of apathy and rebelliousness – responses often noted among inmates in studies of real prisons. These effects were so marked and the level of tension so high that the fourteen-day experiment had to be called off after just six days because of the distress exhibited by participants. Even before this, five 'prisoners' were released because of extreme anxiety and emotional problems. However, many 'guards' were unhappy that the study had ended prematurely, suggesting they enjoyed the power the experiment afforded them.

Reactions to the mock prison regime in the Stanford prison experiment led one inmate to stage a hunger strike just to get out.

On the basis of the findings, Zimbardo concluded that the dispositional hypothesis could not account for the participants' reactions. Instead, he proposed an alternative 'situational' explanation: behaviour in prisons is influenced by the prison

situation itself, not by the individual characteristics of those involved. In particular, the expectations attached to the roles being played tended to shape people's behaviour. Some of the guards' behaviour had deteriorated – they treated prisoners badly, regularly handing out punishments and appearing to take pleasure in the distress of the prisoners. Zimbardo suggested this was due to the power relationships the jail had established. Their control over prisoners' lives very quickly became a source of enjoyment for the guards. On the other hand, following a short period of rebelliousness, prisoners exhibited a 'learned helplessness' and dependency. The study tells us something important about why social relationships often deteriorate within prisons and, by implication, in other 'total institutions' (Goffman 1968 [1961]). This has little to do with individual personalities and much more to do with the social structure of the prison environment and the social roles within it.

Critical points

Critics argue that there were serious ethical problems with this study. Participants were not given full information about the purpose of the research, and it is questionable whether they could really have given 'informed consent'. Should the study even have been allowed to go ahead? The sample selected was clearly not representative of the population as a whole, as all were students and all were male. Generalizing about the effects of 'prison life' is therefore very difficult based on such a small and unrepresentative sample. The constructed nature of the situation may also invalidate the findings for generalizing to real-world prison regimes. For example, participants knew their imprisonment would last only fourteen days, and they were paid $15 a day for their participation. Well-established problems of prisons such as racism, violence and sexual abuse were also absent. Critics say that the experiment is therefore not a meaningful comparison with real prison life.

Contemporary significance

In spite of the somewhat artificial situation – it was an experiment, after all – Zimbardo's findings have been widely referred to since

the 1970s. For example, Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) draws on this study to help explain the behaviour of inmates and guards in Nazi-run concentration camps during the Second World War. In recent years the issue of mistreatment and bullying of older and disabled people in care-home settings in England has been exposed in a series of scandals, resulting in dismissals and the prosecution of staff members. Zimbardo (2008) himself discussed some of the parallels between the experiment and real-world episodes, including the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners in Abu Ghraib in 2003–4, suggesting that the focus should be not on finding the 'bad apple' but on reforming the 'bad barrel'. His most general thesis, that institutional settings can shape social relations and behaviour, remains a powerful one.

THINKING CRITICALLY

The fact that some students left early and the experiment was cut short suggests that the experiment's effects were significant. But which aspects of prison life could experiments of this kind *never* replicate? Write a 500-word position paper explaining the benefits of allowing sociologists to conduct experiments using human beings. What are the counterarguments?

A historical perspective is also essential in sociological research, as we frequently need a *time perspective* to make sense of the material we collect about a particular problem. Sociologists commonly want to investigate past events directly. Some periods of history can be studied in a direct way while there are still survivors around, and there have been some insightful studies of the Holocaust in Europe during the Second World War. Research in oral history means interviewing people about events they were part of or witnessed at earlier points in their lives. This kind of direct testimony can be gained, at most, for sixty or seventy years back in time.

For historical research into earlier periods, sociologists draw on documentary research, using written records often contained in the special collections of libraries or other archives. The range of useful

documents is extensive, taking in personal sources such as diaries, official sources such as policy documents, records of births and deaths, tax records, and documents from private bodies such as businesses and voluntary organizations, as well as magazines and newspapers. Depending on the research question, historical documents such as these can all constitute primary sources just as much as the data recorded in interviews with war survivors. However, historical sociologists also make use of secondary sources: accounts of historical events written by people *after* the event. Most documentary studies utilize both primary and secondary sources. However, sociologists face the same issues as historians when they use such sources. How authentic are the documents? Is the information within them reliable? Do they represent only a partial viewpoint? Documentary research requires a patient, systematic approach to sources and their interpretation.

An interesting example of the use of historical documents is Anthony Ashworth's study of trench warfare during the First World War (Ashworth 1980). Ashworth drew on diverse documentary sources: official histories of the war, official publications of the time, notes and records kept by soldiers, and personal accounts of war experiences. He was able to develop a rich and detailed description of life in the trenches that contained some surprises. For instance, he found that most soldiers formed their own ideas about how often they intended to engage in combat and often ignored the rules and commands of their officers.

Ashworth's research concentrated on a relatively short time period – 1914 to 1918 – but there have been many studies investigating social change over much longer periods, making use of comparative research in that historical context. A modern classic of comparative historical sociology is Theda Skocpol's (1979) analysis of social revolutions, which is discussed in 'Classic studies' 2.2.

Visual sociology

Although anthropology has long made use of visual sources of information such as photographs and film footage, sociology has tended

to be a subject focused on written texts (Harper 2010). That is not to say that sociologists do not produce their own visual materials. Representations of numerical and statistical information are turned into easy-to-read pie charts, tables and graphical representations, while ethnographic research is often presented with photographs included. However, these visual elements are almost always ancillary to the main text, which is the more significant part of the articles and books through which the sociologist's arguments are made (Chaplin 1994).

In more recent years some research studies have made use of digital technologies and devices to document areas of social life that are hard to access. For example, Bancroft and his colleagues (2014) recruited female students into their project aimed at exploring young women's drinking culture in Edinburgh, Scotland. The students effectively became participant-researchers, using smartphone cameras to document their own pleasureseeking activities in the night-time economy. We can probably expect this kind of approach to become more commonplace in certain types of research project in the future.

Some sociologists have become increasingly interested in a 'visual sociology', in which photographs, film, television programmes, video, and so on, are objects of study in their own right (Tinkler 2013). Hence, family photograph albums can be treated as key resources in understanding the passage of generations, while the history of film or art can tell us something of the social norms, dress codes and manners of earlier times. But the process of production through which visual materials come into being also forms a field of study, and we can ask some familiar questions about them. Who produced them? For what reason? How were they produced? What has been included and what omitted? Studying the production of visual materials forms one part of the broader field of the production of culture, through which we gain a better understanding of how different societies represent their ways of life to their members.

[Classic studies 2.2](#) Theda Skocpol's comparison of social revolutions

The research problem

As all students of sociology and history are taught, the French Revolution of 1789 transformed France for ever. But why did it happen at that time? Was it just a historical accident or was it inevitable? The early twentieth-century revolutions in China and Russia not only turned those countries into communist societies, they also significantly shaped the direction of the modern world itself. Again, why then? The American sociologist Theda Skocpol (1947–) set out to uncover the similarities and differences across these revolutionary periods. Her ambitious task was to produce a general theory of the origins and nature of revolution grounded in detailed empirical studies. The result was *States and Social Revolutions* (1979), one of the classic studies of long-term social transformation.

Skocpol's explanation

Skocpol looked at the processes of revolution in three different historical contexts: the 1789 French Revolution (1786–1800); the 1917 revolutions in Russia (1917–21) and the revolutionary period in China (1911–49). Given the essentially historical questions asked, her main method was the use and careful interpretation of a range of primary and secondary documentary sources. Although there are many differences between the three cases, Skocpol argues that their underlying structural causes are, in fact, similar. She rejects the Marxist idea that revolutions are the intentional product of mass, class-based movements with deep grievances. Instead, she argues that revolutions are not made, they come. That is, social revolutions are largely the result of the unintended consequences of intentional human actions. Before the Russian Revolution, for instance, various political groups were trying to overthrow the existing regime, but none of these – including the Bolsheviks, who eventually came to power – anticipated the revolution that occurred. A series of clashes

and confrontations gave rise to a process of social transformation much deeper and more radical than anyone had foreseen.

The so-called Arab Spring, which began in December 2010, saw large-scale protests against numerous regimes in the Middle East and North Africa. In Syria the situation developed into a complex civil war and, by December 2020 – one decade after the start of the original protests in Tunisia – Bashar al-Assad's regime looked to have clung on to power. Mass social unrest does not always lead to revolution.

Skocpol's explanation is that all three revolutions occurred in predominantly agrarian societies and were made possible only when the existing state structures (administrative and military) were breaking down as they came under intense competitive pressure from other states. In this context, it was peasant revolts and mass mobilizations that brought about social revolutions in France, China and Russia. Thus Skocpol argued against the widespread notion that peasants were *not* a 'revolutionary class'. Some similarities with other revolutions in Vietnam, Cuba, Mexico and Yugoslavia can also be seen. Skocpol's causal explanation focuses on state structures. As these began to break down, a power

vacuum was created and states lost their legitimacy, enabling revolutionary forces to take power.

Skocpol's research makes use of the 'logic of scientific experiment' for comparative studies outlined by John Stuart Mill in the mid-nineteenth century. She adopts Mill's 'method of similarity', taking three similar events (revolutions) in very different national contexts. This allows her to look for key similarities across the three cases which can be identified as *independent variables* and thus help to explain the causes of political revolutions.

Critical points

Some of Skocpol's critics have raised questions about the structural argument of her thesis. This, they say, leaves little room for active agency on the part of people. *How* did peasant groups revolt? Did leaders not play a part in the revolutions? Could things have turned out differently if individual actors and groups had chosen alternative courses of action? Are individuals so powerless to influence change in the face of structural pressures?

A further criticism is of Skocpol's notion of 'cause' in this context. Some contend that what her argument amounts to is really a set of sophisticated generalizations in relation to the cases she studied. And, though such generalizations work quite well for these specific cases, this is not the same thing as a general causal theory of social revolutions. Does the thesis hold for, say, the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the 'Velvet Revolution' in (former) Czechoslovakia in 1989, or the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa during the 'Arab Spring' which spread from Tunisia in 2010–11? So, critics say, despite setting out to discover the underlying causes and nature of social revolutions, in the end, Skocpol's study showed that each revolution has to be studied in its own right.

Contemporary significance

Skocpol's study has become a modern classic for two reasons. First, it developed a powerful causal explanation of revolutionary change which emphasized the underlying social structural conditions of revolution. Such a strong central thesis was, nevertheless,

underpinned by very detailed analysis of primary and secondary documentary sources. Hence, Skocpol successfully demonstrated that comparative-historical sociology could combine the study of large-scale, long-term social change with the empirical investigation of historical events 'on the ground'. In essence, she brought together the macro- and microsociological aspects into one theoretical framework. Second, Skocpol made a very significant contribution to our understanding of revolutions. She showed that there are enough similarities across different revolutions to warrant pursuing general theories of social change. In this way, her thesis helped to bridge the gap between mainstream historical studies and the sociology of revolutions.

For some, visual sociology has the potential to enhance and expand sociological work in *every* specialist field, all of which involve some forms of visual data and sources of evidence. As Pauwels (2015: 5) puts it: 'the ultimate goal of a visual social science might lie beyond the (mere) ambition to become a well-established and legitimate way of doing social research, by striving to change social scientists' ways of looking at and thinking about society in a more profound way.' In time, sociologists may well become experts in the collection and use of existing visual data, producing their own visual materials and communicating their findings in more visual ways.

Digital sociology

The emergence of the internet and worldwide web presents new opportunities and challenges for sociologists. One opportunity is simply gaining access to an unrivalled range of information from across the globe with just a few clicks. The internet has become an invaluable research tool that can be used to gain access to articles, books, research reports, government documents, parliamentary debates (live or in document form), historical documents, archives and lots, lots more. In this way, academic exchanges are speeded up and local research reaches the international scholarly community with ease. As Selwyn (2019: vi) notes, 'This abundance of online information reflects the fast-changing nature of scholarship and knowledge.'

There is a danger that this *accessibility* of information may be mistaken for *accuracy* of information. Students and researchers have to be constantly critical and ask the same questions they would of all other sources. Who produced it? How was it produced? Has it been subject to review by other academics? How credible is the source? Does the source have any direct interest in the information that might lead to bias? Many lecturers are engaged in teaching students the skills required to be able to make effective use of online sources (Ó Dochartaigh 2009). Researchers can use apps, email, Skype, online questionnaires and webcam interviews as part of their research projects, while the huge number of online communities offers the possibility of doing research in much the same way as would happen in conventional social groups and communities (Hewson et al. 2002). Chatrooms, forums and other social media are used by specific interest groups to organize online and as a result may present the best or only way into a particular subject.

The rapid spread of digital technologies has stimulated debates about how the practice of sociology is affected in the digital age, and these debates are part of the recent sub-field known as digital sociology. Digital devices and technologies have become embedded in people's ordinary lifestyles, as they engage with online news feeds, banking, social media, search engines, gaming, video streaming and much more. Alongside these are smart TVs, refrigerators and white goods, home lighting and electronics, sensors and programmers, which collectively have come to be labelled the emerging 'Internet of Things'. All of which means that social life has become 'profoundly digital and digitized' and is lived in and through digital systems (Selwyn 2019: 2). One key development is that, through digitization, very large quantities of data are now routinely collected, including text messages and call records, search engine selections, and credit card transactions, along with GPS location data, which records not only what people do but where they do it.

For some, this mass of digital data allows sociologists to find out much more about social life and social relations than ever before and to avoid the charge that sociology is out of touch with the new reality (Marres 2017). And, rather than relying on data generated via the somewhat

artificial methods of surveys, interviews and focus groups, digital data are said to be 'naturally occurring', part of the millions of interactions and exchanges between people as they go about their daily lives. Savage and Burrows (2007) argue that exploring this data allows sociologists to move towards describing the complexities of social life in fine-grained detail as never before, perhaps marking a new way of *doing* sociology.

However, digitization also opens up the potential for interventions in social life to bring about change. Marres (2017: 7–10) reports on one such example, that of the Samaritan Radar, a social media app developed to try to identify social media users who may be at risk of suicide. The app enabled real-time monitoring and analysis of Twitter messages, alerting followers of those thought to be at risk and offering advice on how they should provide support. Such interventionist potential could suggest that the longrejected nineteenth-century positivist ideal of science being able to predict and shape human behaviour may make a digital-age return. But, before we run away with this idea, it is important to rehearse some criticisms of the recent digital turn in sociology.

First, it is not correct to suggest that sociology has only very recently come to see digital methods as potentially useful. Computing has been a staple of sociological analysis since at least the 1960s, as anyone who has used the standard software packages SPSS and NVivo, for quantitative and qualitative analysis respectively, will attest. The novelty of digital technology as research tools should not be overstated. On the other hand, digitization is clearly influencing conventional methods, even fieldwork, some of which can be conducted online with particular groups.

Second, the claim that digital data are 'naturally occurring' has been challenged. The algorithms used by major search engines, such as Google, are created by company workers, and digital data are the products of human activity. Lupton (2015: 8) argues that 'Human judgement steps in at each stage of the production of data: in deciding what constitutes data; what data are important to collect and aggregate; how they should be classified and organized into hierarchies; whether they are "clean" or "dirty" …; and so on.' Similarly,

rather than being just 'raw data' waiting to be analysed, digital data are just as likely to tell us something about the devices and systems involved as they do about the behaviour of people who use them. Marres (2017: 22) says that, 'if a particular app is frequently downloaded by a particular group of users, does that tell us something about those users, or does it rather tell us something about the auto-suggest and rankings of apps on the platforms they use?' Hence, we should be cautious about the uncritical use of digital data in social research.

Third, digital sociology, like all sociological research, is likely to raise ethical issues of confidentiality, privacy and the legitimate collection and use of data. The Samaritan Radar app is one example. The app was shut down following criticism that, in informing followers without the consent of the account holder, it risked stigmatizing people and constituted an invasion of privacy. Yet the very concept of privacy may need to be rethought, given the ubiquity of sharing within social media and widespread [dataveillance](#) – the systematic monitoring and use of data relating to people's online activity. A survey by the Wellcome Trust (2013) in the UK suggests that people were broadly positive towards monitoring and use of online data in government crime-prevention work, for reasons of national security and in improving government services, but concerns were expressed about data theft, hacking, targeted advertising and possible invasions of privacy. Given that online research can be conducted anonymously and without any face-to-face contact, it may be that issues of privacy, confidentiality and risk will need to be reconsidered by the bodies that govern research practice in professional sociology.

The sub-field of digital sociology is very recent, with its origins under this label being traceable to early work from 2009 and 2010. And though research in this field continues apace, foundational issues around what it should cover and what methods are appropriate to it also currently remain unresolved. Are existing research methods capable of understanding social life today, or should sociologists use digital technologies to develop novel methods that are better able to tell us about social life in the digital age? The answer to this question has

implications not just for digital sociology but for the future practice of sociology as such.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> What kind of useful information can sociologists really gather from social media? How might this help us to establish the extent of gender inequality or support for political parties? Could it give us better insights into *why* people support particular political parties or *how* knowledgeable people are about gender inequality?

Triangulation and mixing methods

All research methods have advantages and limitations, and recognition of this means that it is commonplace today to find sociologists combining methods in a single piece of research, using each to supplement and check on the others. This process is known as triangulation. Advocates of triangulation argue that it produces more reliable, valid and comprehensive knowledge than a single research method, though Denzin (1970) actually distinguished four types of triangulation. *Data triangulation* occurs when data are collected at different times and perhaps uses different sampling strategies within the same research project. *Investigator triangulation* is where a team of researchers, rather than a single researcher, carries out the fieldwork. *Theoretical triangulation* is more controversial, as it involves using several theoretical approaches when interpreting the data. Finally, *methodological triangulation* is the adoption of more than one methodology as part of a research study. We can see the potential value of combining methods – and, more generally, the problems and pitfalls of real sociological research – by looking once again at Laud Humphreys' *Tearoom Trade*.

One of the questions Humphreys wanted to answer was 'What kind of men use the tearooms?' It was very hard for him to find this out because all he could really do was observe. The norm of silence made it difficult to ask questions or even to talk, and it would have been very odd if he had asked personal questions of the participants. As we have seen, Humphreys noted the car number-plates of people involved,

giving the numbers to a friend at the Department of Motor Vehicles, who secured the owners' addresses. Some months later, he persuaded a work colleague at Washington University in St Louis, who was conducting a door-to-door survey of sexual habits, to add the names and addresses of his own tearoom sample. Disguised as an investigator, Humphreys interviewed the men in their homes to learn more about their backgrounds and lives, interviewing wives and family members too.

Leaving aside the unconventional and ethically dubious tactics he employed, Humphreys was engaging in a form of methodological triangulation. He tried to overcome the limitations of participant observation by joining a social survey and, by combining the results, was able to produce a richer, more detailed and powerful piece of research. Mixing methods has become common today for precisely this reason. However, it is not a panacea and is certainly not accepted or adopted by all.

The influence of sociology

Because sociologists often study things about which most people have some personal experience, it is possible to believe that sociological knowledge is merely a restatement, in abstract jargon, of things we already know. Yet very rarely is this the case. Because sociological findings must be rooted in evidence they are never just personal opinion or speculation. In fact, good sociology sharpens our understanding of things that appear obvious or completely transforms our common-sense perspective (Berger 1963). In either event, sociology is neither tedious nor a restatement of the obvious. Sociological research has allowed us to see aspects of society about which we had no previous knowledge, and research findings often challenge our personal beliefs and prejudices about social groups, individuals and institutions.

Similarly, sociologists may begin with a problem to which many people think they already know the answer. Is crime really getting worse? Why are boys underachieving in secondary school? Why do women still do more housework than men? In addressing such questions, sociologists are never content with anecdotal evidence, personal beliefs, newspaper stories or television news reports. They always employ research methods to collect evidence, which they then analyse and interpret using theoretical ideas to generate a deeper understanding of the phenomena under study. In this way sociology often challenges the 'obvious' or simple answers and sets our local knowledge within a much wider frame of reference, most recently the global level of social interactions.

Sociological research is rarely of interest only to the community of sociologists. A good proportion of research funding comes from government sources and is directly linked to social issues and problems. Many studies of crime and deviance, for example, target specific offences or types of offender with a view to gaining better understanding so that the problems associated with crime can be tackled more effectively. Sociologists also work with voluntary agencies, public bodies and businesses, bringing their research skills to bear on

questions set by the former. Much of this is [applied social research](#), which does not simply endeavour to produce better knowledge but also seeks to inform interventions aimed at improving some aspect of social life. Researchers studying the effects on children of parental alcohol use, for instance, may be interested in whether a particular treatment programme has any effect on reducing alcohol abuse.

The findings from sociological research are also disseminated throughout society. Sociology, it must be emphasized, is not just the *study* of societies; it is a significant element *in the continuing life* of societies. Consider the transformations taking place in relation to marriage, sexuality and the family (discussed in [chapters 7](#), [14](#) and [15](#)). Most people have some knowledge of these as a result of the filtering down into society of social scientific research findings. Our thinking and behaviour are thus affected by sociological knowledge in complex and often subtle ways. However, as our behaviour changes, so does society – the very subject of sociological investigation. A way of describing this two-way phenomenon, using our technical language, is to say that sociology stands in a 'reflexive relation' to the human beings whose behaviour it studies. Reflexivity, as we shall see in [chapter 3](#), describes the interchange between sociology and social life. We should not be surprised that sociological findings often correlate closely with common sense. But this is not because sociology tells us what we know already. Rather, sociological research helps to shape our common-sense knowledge of society in the first place, even though we may not immediately realize it.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. What research methods were used in Humphreys' research study *Tearoom Trade* (1970)? Why was this project considered 'controversial'?

2. Are any of these subjects effectively 'off-limits' to sociologists?

   a. gender differences in the membership and use of dating apps

   b. the voting intentions of newly eligible voters aged eighteen to nineteen

   c. the extent of elder abuse in care homes.

3. Explain what is meant by each of these: comparative research, developmental research and applied social research.

4. List some ethical issues that sociological researchers need to consider. How are these different to those that face natural scientists?

5. 'Is sociology a scientific discipline?' Choose TWO philosophers of science and outline how they answered this question.

6. What is the difference between a correlation and a cause? Provide one example of a genuine causal relationship.

7. 'Quantitative research can be scientific, qualitative research cannot.' Explain why this statement is not correct.

8. Give ONE real-world example of an appropriate subject for each of the following methods: ethnography, biographical methods, visual sociology, survey research, historical research.

9. Devise a research strategy involving TWO research methods to investigate the following subjects. What ethical and practical problems do you foresee and how would you overcome them?

   a. domestic violence within female same-sex relationships

   b. the extent of self-harming behaviour among schoolchildren aged eleven to sixteen

      c. the coping strategies adopted by 'lifers' in male prisons.

10. What is meant by digital sociology? What kinds of digital data can be useful for sociologists?

🔎 [Research in practice](#)

Most sociology graduates will know of the classic studies of the discipline. But sociology exists in its ongoing research programmes and studies, most of which are published in a range of academic journals. Journal articles (called 'papers') are part of the continuing process of data collection, theory building and extending our stock of knowledge.

Anthropologists and sociological ethnographers have long been aware of the dangers of getting too close to their subjects during the research process, which may threaten their objectivity and compromise their findings. But is this caution really justified? Is it possible that researchers and their subjects may develop friendships that, rather than compromising their research, may actually be beneficial to it?

The paper below explores this issue of personal relationships in auto/biographical research. Read the piece and tackle the questions that follow.

> O'Donoghue, C. T. (2014) 'Friendship in the Field: Ethics and Reflexivity in Auto/biographical Research', *Journal of Postgraduate Research* [Trinity College Dublin]: 177–91; www.tara.tcd.ie/handle/2262/73634.

1. What is the main issue which this paper attempts to tackle?

2. How was the sample for the paper gathered?

3. What advantages are claimed for the 'life history' method over other research methods?

4. How did the researcher try to keep the 'researcher-as-friend' out of the research process? From evidence in the paper, how successful was this strategy?

5. What is meant by 'the vulnerable observer'?

6. 'The research participants were aware of the impact that these narratives were having on me, and that I was more than a "mere note-taker"….' Is there any evidence that this may have had a negative influence on the research?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Sociological research usually starts with a problem or question, and the project involves several stages. Design your own small-scale project adopting the first four stages of the process (refer back to figure 2.1).

- Select a subject of interest, then narrow this down to a specific research question.

- Identify some key words on the subject and carry out a library search of the relevant literature using those words. Note the ten closest matches.

- Consult the first three of these to help construct a hypothesis for your project. What do you actually want to find out?

- Now think about exactly *how* you would carry out the research. Which method or methods are most likely to provide an answer? Should you use more than one method?

- Finally, what obstacles do you foresee when the research gets under way and how might you overcome them?

⭐ **Society in the arts**

1 The American photographer Shelby Lee Adams is widely known for his portraits and images of community life in the tough and relatively poor Appalachian mountain regions of Kentucky over more than thirty-five years. Describing himself as a visual artist, Adams argues that his work is aimed at 'overcoming superficiality by embracing the people straightforwardly, demystifying and destroying stereotypes, exposing regional and national misunderstandings and prejudice against rural peoples and all peoples in general.' Examples of his work and ideals can be found on his own site: http://shelby-lee-adams.blogspot.com/.

Jennifer Baichwal's documentary film *The True Meaning of Pictures: Shelby Lee Adams' Appalachia* was released in 2002. This film explores debates around, and the political impact of, the representation of social groups in artistic works. In this case, do Adams's images realize his own aims or could they reinforce existing negative stereotypes of poorer communities and families as suggested in this critical online article:

https://hyperallergic.com/28555/capitalist-realism-or-poverty-porn/.

Do your own research on Adams's work, then write a 1,000-word essay addressing the question 'What, if any, sociological insights into Appalachian communities can we gain from the work of Shelby Lee Adams that conventional sociological methods could not achieve?' Be sure to explain *why* such visual recording adds to our understanding.

2 Interviews are conducted not just by sociologists but also by journalists, market researchers and TV documentary makers, and all interviewers find practical ways of eliciting the information they seek. The investigative journalist Louis Theroux likes to use *unstructured interviews* to draw out information from his subjects. He discusses his techniques in this short interview: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pzC6NbVN1Xk.

Now watch *Louis Theroux: Behind Bars* (2008), directed by Stuart Cabb, as he interviews guards and inmates at San Quentin State Prison in San Francisco, California: https://archive.org/details/BehindBarsInSanQuentin-LouisTheroux.

Does the unstructured interview method work in this context? Do the interviews help us to understand the relationships between inmates and guards? Did inmates 'play to the camera', giving responses that make for good television rather than telling the truth? If you wanted to conduct your own research in a prison setting, what research methods would you use and why?

Further reading

There are many books on research methods, including some excellent introductorylevel texts. Our selection here is not definitive though these are all very useful. Try a few to see which you find most accessible.

Newcomers to sociology need a text that is both informative and practical, so something like Judith Bell and Stephen Walters's (2018) *Doing Your Research Project: A Guide for First-Time Researchers* (7th edn, London: Open University Press) is a very good place to begin. Similarly, Keith F. Punch's (2014) *Introduction to Social Research: Quantitative and Qualitative Approaches* (3rd edn, London: Sage) does exactly what it says. Helen Kara's (2016) *Creative Research Methods in the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide* (Bristol: Policy Press) covers recent developments in mixed-methods research, using technology and other increasingly popular methods.

For something a little more detailed and comprehensive, try Alan Bryman's (2016) *Social Research Methods* (5th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press), which is widely adopted by lecturers for their courses. Nicholas Walliman's (2016) *Social Research Methods* (2nd edn, London: Sage) is detailed and comprehensive.

For an introduction to statistics and the SPSS software package, Neil J. Salkind and Bruce B. Frey's (2019) *Statistics for People Who (Think They) Hate Statistics* (7th edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage) is lively and accessible for beginners as well as those with more experience. One other worthwhile book is Darrell Huff's (1991) *How to Lie with Statistics* (London: Penguin), which is apparently 'the best-selling statistics book ever written' (see J. M. Steele (2005), 'Darrell Huff and Fifty Years of How to Lie with Statistics', *Statistical Science*, 20(3): 205–9). This is probably because of its irreverent tone, but it remains an excellent guide to the misuse of statistical information and has a serious message.

A good dictionary is an excellent investment, and Victor Jupp's (2006) *The Sage Dictionary of Social Research Methods* (London: Sage) covers

most topics.

For a collection of readings on research methods and different methodological approaches, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

National Centre for Research Methods, UK – contains many resources and articles on methods. A very useful site:
www.ncrm.ac.uk/

CESSDA – Consortium of European Social Science Data Archives – houses many social science data archives covering different types of research:
www.nsd.uib.no/cessda/home.html

The UK Office for National Statistics, which includes lots of survey research, but other types as well:
www.ons.gov.uk/ons/index.html

The American Sociological Association – their useful research methods section:
www.asanet.org/topics/research-methods

The UK Data Archive – a large collection of digital data on a variety of subjects:
www.data-archive.ac.uk/

Ipsos MORI – a merged company (Ipsos UK and MORI) focusing on market research and social research:
www.ipsos-mori.com/

CHAPTER 3

THEORIES AND PERSPECTIVES

CONTENTS

The theory of human-made global warming, despite being supported by the majority of natural scientists, has been the subject of acrimonious debate and theoretical disagreement.

The former US president, Donald Trump, has long argued that he does not believe in the theory of anthropogenic or 'human-caused' climate change. In 2017 he announced that the USA would withdraw from the Paris Climate Change Agreement in 2020. Then, in interviews following a state visit to the UK in 2019, he said:

> I believe there's a change in the weather, and I think it changes both ways. Don't forget, it used to be called global warming, that wasn't working, then it was called climate change. Now it's actually called extreme weather, because with extreme weather you can't miss…. I don't remember tornados in the United States to this extent but then when you look back 40 years ago we had the worst tornado binge we ever had. In the 1890s we had our worst hurricanes. (Cited in Weaver and Lyons 2019; BBC News 2019e).

Donald Trump is clearly at odds with the overwhelming majority of natural scientists who say the evidence increasingly supports the theory of anthropogenic (human-forced) global warming. Trump questions both the evidence and the theory, while other sceptics accept the evidence of warming but reject the anthropogenic thesis, arguing that 'natural cycles' of warming and cooling explain the changing climate. This particular theoretical dispute has practical and serious consequences. Is there a 'climate emergency' or not? Should we phase out fossil fuels more quickly? Do we give up on petrol and diesel cars and move rapidly to all-electric instead? At present, the scientists seem to be winning the argument against the president's view.

See [chapter 5](#), 'The Environment', for an extended discussion of climate change.

Just as in the natural sciences, sociologists need to devise abstract interpretations – theories – to explain the evidence they collect. If they are to formulate appropriate questions that focus their efforts, they also need to adopt a theoretical approach at the outset of their research. Yet sociological theorizing does not take place in an isolated academic ivory tower. This is clear from the questions posed by the discipline's founders, which were tied to the major social and political issues of the day. Marx sought to explain the dynamics of the capitalist economy, the causes of poverty and growing social inequality. Durkheim's studies investigated the character of industrial society and the future of religion, while Weber sought to explain the emergence of capitalism and the consequences of bureaucratic organizations for the individual. But are these still the central issues today?

Many sociologists think that the central issues are significantly different today. For example, what are the social, economic and political consequences of globalization? How, why and with what consequences are gender relations being transformed? What is the future for

multicultural societies? Indeed, what is the future for human populations across the world in the light of climate change and global environmental problems? In order to address these matters, sociologists have been forced to re-evaluate the classical theories and, where these are found wanting, to develop novel theories of their own.

For newcomers to sociology, a historical perspective is vital. Not only does it help readers to understand how the discipline emerged and changed into its present shape, but it also encourages us all to avoid trying to reinvent the (theoretical) wheel when there is no need to do so. Critics of sociological theorizing – more than a few from within the discipline itself – complain that too many 'new' theories are really just 'old' theories dressed up in a new language. An appreciation of the development of sociological theory over time sensitizes us to this criticism.

Theories, theorists and perspectives

The field of theory in sociology is quite complex because some theories are described as 'sociological theories', others as 'social theories'. Is this just splitting hairs? In blunt terms, sociological theories seek to explain empirical findings and try to avoid the sociologist's personal beliefs and political commitments interfering with their work. Social theories do not necessarily originate within sociology, often contain normative critiques of social and political arrangements, and argue that a politically neutral sociology is not possible. Bear this division in mind as you read through the chapter. As we will see, this basic distinction is not hard and fast, as some scholars move between the two types, devising sociological theories to understand and explain aspects of social life but also criticizing what they see as pernicious inequalities.

Coming to terms with the array of theories and perspectives in sociology is challenging. It would be much easier if we had one central theory around which all sociologists could work, and for a time, in the 1950s and 1960s, the structural functionalist approach of Talcott Parsons did come close. But the present period is marked by a diversity of theoretical approaches and perspectives, which makes the task of evaluating competing theories more difficult than once it was. Yet theoretical pluralism also brings vitality to sociological theory, arguably deepening our overall understanding of social life. And, while sociology today includes numerous 'middle-range' theories that try to explain a very specific aspect of social life (Merton 1957), there is still room for grand theories that try to explain social structures or the long-term development of human societies (Skinner 1990).

This chapter rounds off a block of three at the start of the book which provides a firm foundation for students approaching sociology. In chapter 1 we explored what sociology adds to the sum total of scientific knowledge. Chapter 2 presented some of the main research methods and techniques used by sociologists – the 'tools of the trade', as it were. And in this chapter we provide a concise account of the history and development of sociological theorizing since the nineteenth century. Of course, we cannot cover all of the important theorists in this short

chapter, so, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Manuel Castells are not discussed here. Their work is found in later chapters where it has been especially influential: Bourdieu's ideas are covered in detail in [chapter 16](#), 'Education', while those of Castells can be found in [chapter 12](#), 'Social Interaction and Daily Life', and [chapter 17](#), 'Work and Employment'.

Our presentation is generally chronological, but not slavishly so. When we introduce Marx, inevitably the discussion stretches from the mid-nineteenth century to Marxist ideas of the twentieth century and beyond. The outline of feminist theories covers a similarly long time period. Our judgement is that this method produces a more coherent narrative, allowing readers to see more easily how and why theoretical perspectives developed in the ways they did.

In the next two sections we trace the emergence of sociological theory and the establishment of sociology through the work of those who are seen to have founded the major European traditions of inquiry in the discipline. We then explore two recurring theoretical dilemmas around which major theoretical debates turn, before ending the chapter with a look at the way that rapid and wide-ranging social changes since the 1970s have forced sociologists to devise new theoretical perspectives. Outhwaite (2015) makes a distinction between the 'formal theories', produced by the classical theorists and those working within their broad perspectives, and the 'less formal' or even 'informal' theories devised by many sociological theorists since the 1970s and 1980s.

While classical sociology was marked by quite formal theoretical systems that looked rather like paradigms, less formal contemporary theories are much looser, rooted in representations of social reality through new concepts such as globalization, risk, postmodernism, reflexive modernization, habitus, liquid modernity, high modernity and even multiple modernities. Outhwaite (2015: 614) describes much of this work as 'celebrity social theory', in the sense that the theoretical perspectives are relatively weak (compared to older, formal theories) while the theorists themselves enjoy widespread recognition. For example, students today would easily recognize the names of Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu and Zygmunt Bauman.

[Table 3.1](#) provides a simple chronological chart which illustrates the emergence and development of theories and perspectives through certain influential theorists and schools of thought. The place of individuals in the sequence is determined roughly by the date of their major publication(s) or the place of schools by their date of formation. This is of course merely a selection and is not meant to be exhaustive, but the table provides some signposts both for this chapter and for the book as a whole.

Table 3.1 Chronology of major sociological theorists and schools, 1750 to the present

1750	European Enlightenment philosophers (1750–1800)
1800	Auguste Comte (1798–1857) Harriet Martineau (1802–76)
1850	Karl Marx (1818–83) Herbert Spencer (1820–1903)
1900	Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)
	Max Weber (1864–1920)
	Georg Simmel (1858–1918) Edmund Husserl (1859–1938)
1930	George H. Mead (1863–1931) Alfred Schutz (1899–1959)
	Chicago School (1920s) Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937)
	W. E. B. Du Bois (1868–1963)
1940	Talcott Parsons (1902–79)
	Frankfurt School (1923–1960s)
	Simone de Beauvoir (1908–86)
1950	Robert Merton (1910–2003)
1960	Erving Goffman (1922–82)
	Betty Friedan (1921–2006)
	Howard Becker (1928–) Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011) Norbert Elias (1897–1990)
1970	Jürgen Habermas (1929–)
	Michel Foucault (1926–84)
1980	Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019)
	Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007)
1990	Anthony Giddens (1938–) Ulrich Beck (1944–2015) Judith Butler (1956–)
	Vandana Shiva (1952–) Zygmunt Bauman (1925–2017)

2000 onwards	Manuel Castells (1942–) Slavoj Žižek (1949–)

Key:

Selected theorists associated with or inspired by the different sociological perspectives are identified thus:

■ Philosophical thinkers

■ Functionalism

■ Marxism

■ Interactionism

■ Feminism

■ Postmodernism/poststructuralism

■ Theoretical syntheses

Towards sociology

A distinct sociological perspective emerged out of two revolutionary transformations in Europe. First, the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and the nineteenth century radically transformed material conditions of life and work, bringing with it new social problems such as urban overcrowding, poor sanitation, disease and industrial pollution. Reformers sought ways to mitigate and solve these problems, which led them to carry out research and gather evidence on their extent and nature to reinforce the case for change.

Second, the French Revolution of 1789 marked the symbolic endpoint of the old European agrarian regimes and absolute monarchies as new republican ideals of freedom, liberty and citizenship rights came to the fore. This revolution is often seen as, in part, the outcome of mid-eighteenth-century European Enlightenment ideas, which challenged tradition and religious authority, promoting philosophical and scientific notions of reason, rationality and critical thinking as the keys to human progress. These revolutionary developments are often seen as instituting a process of European modernization that led to modernity, a term that refers to an era characterized by a combination of rationalization, democratization, individualism, growing reliance on scientific thinking and rapid, continuous technological development. In this sense, sociology was a 'modern' discipline that developed to try and understand how such radical social change had occurred and what its consequences were.

Enlightenment philosophers saw the advancement of reliable knowledge in the natural sciences, particularly astronomy, physics and chemistry, as showing the way forward. The English physicist Sir Isaac Newton (1643–1727) was singled out as an exemplary scientist whose ideas of Natural Law and scientific method appealed to Enlightenment scholars. The latter argued that, in principle, it should be possible to discover similar laws, using similar methods, in social and political life as well. This idea is the basis of positivist philosophy in the sciences.

How is the concept of modernity faring in the twenty-first century? List some examples which suggest that we are more aware that there is also a 'dark side' to scientific knowledge, industrial processes and technological change.

Positivism and 'social evolution'

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) saw the science of society – which he termed 'sociology' – as essentially similar to the natural sciences. His positivist approach was based on the principle of direct observation, with theoretical statements aimed at establishing causal, law-like generalizations. The task of sociology was to gain reliable knowledge of the social world in order to make predictions about it and, on the basis of those predictions, to intervene and shape it in progressive ways. Comte's positivist philosophy was clearly inspired by the achievements of the natural sciences, which were producing reliable knowledge with very practical applications.
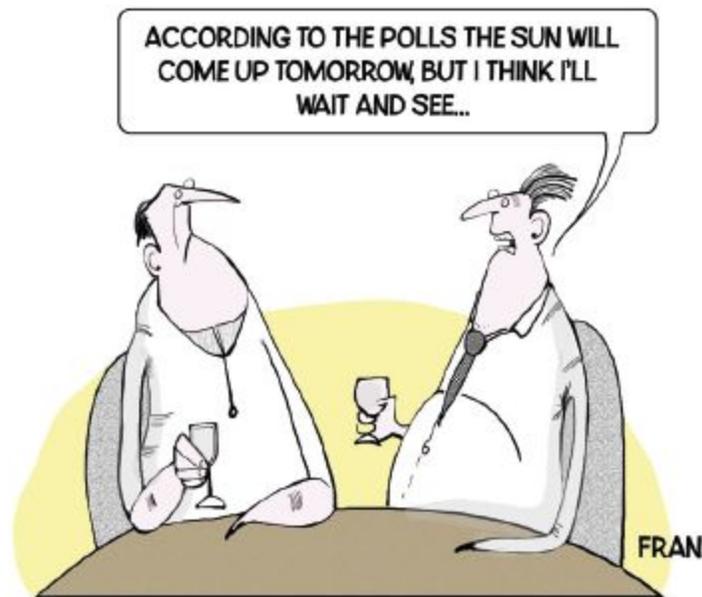
But could such reliable, predictive knowledge ever be achieved in relation to human behaviour? Most sociologists today think it cannot,

and very few would call themselves 'positivist' in Comte's sense. Comtean positivism is rejected because it seems to suggest that people can be shaped and controlled, a notion that many view as impossible, dangerous or both. Self-conscious human beings cannot be studied in the same way as, say, frogs, because they are capable of acting in ways that deliberately confound our predictions about them. Even if Comte was right and humans *could* be scientifically studied, their behaviour forecast and positive interventions made, who would do the intervening? Scientists? Politicians? Religious authorities? Would central direction of this kind be compatible with democratic politics?

See chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', for a longer discussion of Comte's ideas.

Comte's version of sociology has little support today, but it is important to remember his formative role in establishing the case for a science of society. His theory of the development of the sciences inspired many others, and positivism was influential into the late nineteenth century. Comte saw the dominant forms of human knowledge passing through three stages: the theological (or religious), the metaphysical (or philosophical) and, finally, the positive (or scientific). The history of the sciences demonstrated this gradual movement, and, as social life was the last area to move into the positive stage, sociology was destined to be the final scientific discipline.

The English philosopher and sociologist Herbert Spencer (1820–1903) drew on Comte's ideas and was among the first to argue that, as the world of nature was subject to biological evolution, so societies were subject to social evolution. This took the form of *structural differentiation*, through which simple societies develop into more complex forms with an increasingly diverse array of social institutions, and *functional adaptation*, as societies accommodate themselves to the external environment. Spencer argued that the industrial societies of

the nineteenth century were essentially exhibiting social evolution, emerging out of the more static and hierarchical societies that preceded them. Spencer also thought that the 'survival of the fittest' applied in social as well as biological evolution and was against state intervention to support the vulnerable or disadvantaged (M. W. Taylor 1992).

Although Spencer's theory of social evolution was generally well received, the twentieth century saw evolutionary theories fall into decline, and few sociology courses today make more than passing reference to them. This stands in stark contrast to another of the grand 'evolutionary' theorists of the nineteenth century, Karl Marx, whose influence on sociology, politics and world history is impossible to overestimate.

Karl Marx: revolution not evolution

Marx's basic ideas on class conflict and social change were introduced in chapter 1, and at this point you may want to refresh your understanding of these. Marx and his colleague, Friedrich Engels, never considered themselves professional sociologists. However, they did seek a scientific understanding of society and, from this, an explanation of long-term social change. Marx viewed his scientific work as marking a break with speculative philosophy and all philosophical forms of thought, arguing that 'the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point however is to change it' (Marx and Engels 1970 [1846]: 123). His interest in and commitment to the European industrial working class was closely linked to his studies of capitalism and its operation.

Marx's theoretical approach: historical materialism

Marx's work is important for sociology in a number of ways, but we will focus on just one – the analysis of capitalism – which is part of his broader theory of class conflict as the driving force in history. This 'grand theory' formed the basis of many later studies and theoretical developments. Marxist theory was also reinterpreted and used by numerous political movements and governments in the twentieth century, including the communist regimes of the former Soviet Union,

Eastern Europe, Cuba, Vietnam and China. Clearly, Marxism is much more than just an academic theory.

Marx's perspective is sometimes referred to as historical materialism; more accurately, perhaps, it is a materialist conception of history. This means that Marx is opposed to idealism, a philosophical doctrine which says that the historical development of societies is driven by abstract ideas or ideals, such as freedom and democracy. Instead, Marx argues that the dominant ideas and ideals of an age are in fact reflections of the dominant way of life, specifically of a society's mode of production. For example, in an age when absolute monarchs reigned, it is not surprising that the dominant ideas suggested that kings and queens had a 'divine right [from God] to rule', while, in our own age of free-market capitalism, the dominant ideas are those of sovereign individuals who make 'free' choices. The dominant ideas of an age are those which support the ruling groups. Marx's 'historical materialism' is interested primarily in how people collectively produce a life together. How do they produce food, shelter and other material goods, and what kind of division of labour exists that enables them to do so?

Successive modes of production: a successful grand theory?

The historical development of human societies is not random or chaotic, but structured. Marx argues that, in the ancient past, small-scale human groups existed with no developed system of property ownership. Instead, all resources acquired were communally owned and no class divisions were present. Marx called this a form of *primitive communism*. But, as the group produced more, this mode of production was effectively outgrown and a new one emerged, this time with some private property ownership (including slavery), as in ancient Greece and Rome.

From here, societies based on settled agriculture and feudal property relations developed. The medieval system of European *feudalism* was based on a fundamental class division between landowners and landless peasants and tenant farmers, who were forced to work for landowners in order to survive. But the feudal mode of production also reached its productive limitations and gave way to the *capitalist society* with which we are now familiar. The early capitalists began to invest in

workshops and manufacturing in the sixteenth century, and by the time of the French Revolution in 1789 they were numerous and powerful enough to become a revolutionary force in history.

Under capitalism, class antagonisms were greatly simplified as society 'split into two great camps' – the property owners (capitalists or the *bourgeoisie*) and the workers (or proletariat). The capitalist revolution broke the bounds of traditional feudal production, demanding tighter discipline and long working hours so capitalists could extract a profit from using workers' labour power. In fact, Marx and Engels (2008 [1848]: 13–14) produce a glowing account of capitalism as the revolutionary transformation of society. In its first 100 years, capitalism 'created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together', though this was achieved by the ruthless exploitation of workers, which led to endemic alienation among the workforce. In Marx's theory, a point is reached when, rather than promoting more growth and development, capitalist relations act as a brake, holding back socio-economic progress. Marx calls this a fundamental contradiction between the relations and forces of production, which eventually leads to revolution (Glyn 1990).

Marx argued that, as workers were brought together in large numbers in factories and on production lines, class consciousness would develop. The introduction of artificial intelligence and robotics into production processes makes this seem less likely today.

Marx expected that capitalism, just like feudalism, would give way to another mode of production – communism – brought about by disaffected workers who develop classconsciousness – an awareness of their exploited position. Under communism, private property would be abolished and genuinely communal social relations established. Unlike primitive communism, modern communism would retain all the benefits of the highly productive industrial system bequeathed by capitalism. This would produce an advanced, humane and sophisticated form of communal life, capable of delivering on the communist principle 'from each, according to his [*sic*] ability, to each, according to his need' (Marx 1938 [1875]: 10). In a very recent work, Bastani (2019) suggests that harnessing the potential of automation, artificial intelligence and robotics in the interests of everyone could lead to a 'fully automated luxury communism' – a contemporary restatement of the end point of Marx's developmental theory.

Evaluation

For Marx, a theory of industrialism *per se* makes no sense. Industrial development required industrialists, and they were also capitalist entrepreneurs. To understand the industrial system means understanding that the new social relationships favour a few and disadvantage the majority. In addition, Marx's perspective provides a useful reminder that factories, workshops and offices, along with smartphones, robots and the internet, do not materialize from thin air. They are the products of a system of antagonistic social relations, rooted in conflict, not consensus.

Marx's perspective shows us that grand theorizing can be useful. The concept of a 'mode of production' allows us to place the welter of historical facts into a general framework, which makes them easier to understand. Many social scientists have operated with this framework, expanding, refining or criticizing it; and, though Marx's theory may be flawed, most sociologists would agree that discovering those flaws has been immensely fruitful for the discipline as a whole.

Marx's work also illustrates the main problem with grand theories: the difficulty of subjecting them to empirical testing. What would we have to find in order conclusively to prove a theory wrong? Does the fact that a communist revolution has not happened in the industrialized countries more than 170 years after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) show that the theory's central prediction was misguided? Later Marxists sought to explain exactly why a communist revolution did not occur and, in doing so, modified Marx's ideas. ['Classic studies' 3.1](#) looks at one especially influential group – the Frankfurt School of critical theory.

[Classic studies 3.1](#) Neo-Marxism: the Frankfurt School of critical theory

Marx forecast that a working-class revolution was at hand, but it did not materialize in his lifetime. Then, in 1917, the Russian Revolution amid the turmoil of the First World War seemed to indicate that, at last, Marx's forecast was on the verge of being proved right. But communism did not spread into the industrialized countries. Instead, the 1930s saw the rise of fascism in Italy and Nazism in Germany, both of which were aggressively anti-communist movements. These developments presented Marxists with a dilemma: was Marx's theory still adequate for understanding the development of capitalism? If it was, then an orthodox form of Marxism would remain valuable. But, if not, then new forms of Marxist theorizing (called neo-Marxism) would be needed.
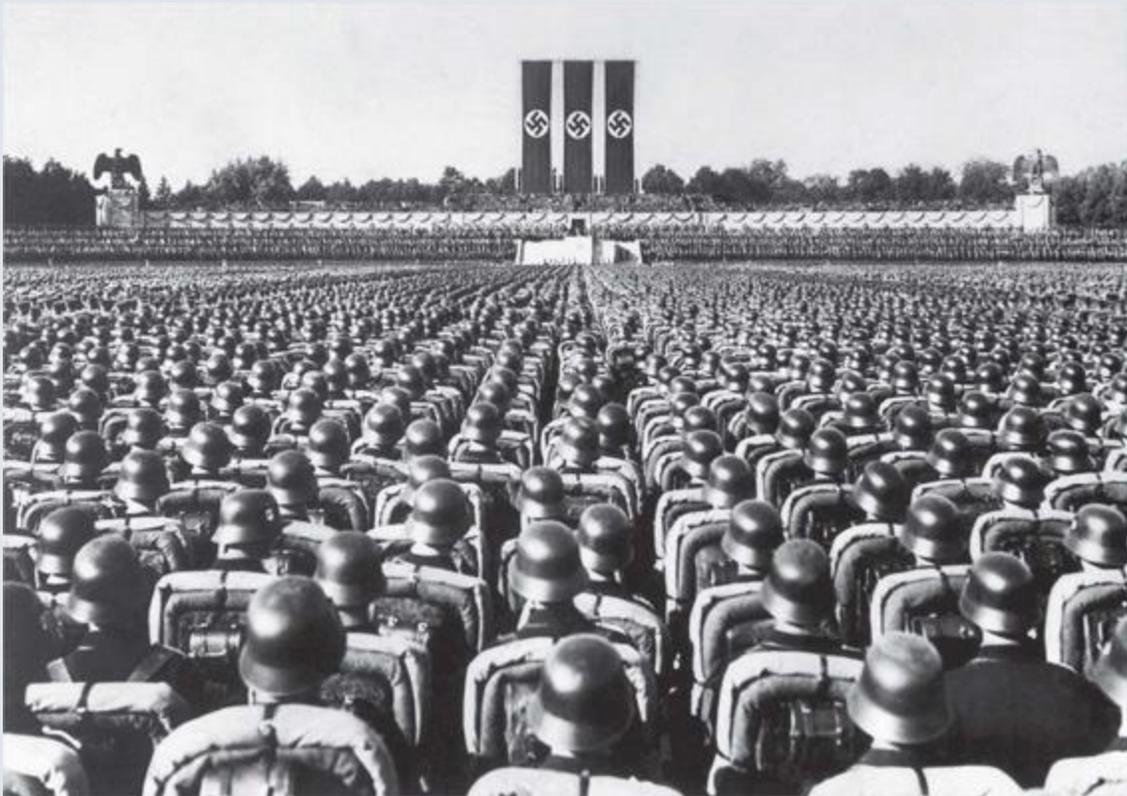
The rise of right-wing fascist movements in Europe led to a rethinking of Marx's ideas.

Marxist thought, in fact, developed in several directions over the twentieth century, particularly among 'Western Marxists', who rejected the Soviet version of communism (Kolakowski 2005). One group within Western Marxism has been especially influential – the Frankfurt School of critical theory. It was originally based at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt under the directorship of Max Horkheimer, but many critical theorists were forced out of Germany when the National Socialists expelled around one-third of the university's staff, resulting in their relocation to Europe and America. The Nazis systematically undermined universities and removed or forced out many Jewish intellectuals.

Drawing on the ideas of Marx and Freud and the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, the Frankfurt School produced a series of important studies of capitalism, fascism, mass culture and the emerging consumer society in the USA. For example, Theodor Adorno (1976 [1950]) and his colleagues analysed the emergence and popularity of fascism as, in part, a consequence of the rise of an authoritarian personality type, susceptible to the attractions of a strong leader. Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) distinguished between 'real' human needs and the many 'false' needs produced by the consumer form of industrial capitalism, with its seductive advertising, which suppressed people's ability to think critically and instead produced a one-dimensional and uncritical form of thinking.

In studies such as these, we can see the Frankfurt thinkers attempting to come to terms with a very different form of capitalism from that which Marx had investigated and shifting their focus onto the sphere of culture rather than the economy. At the same time, the optimistic Marxist vision of a working-class revolution began to fade, as the obstacles to revolution seemed to mount in the consumer-capitalist societies.

The most recent critical theorist to exert an influence in sociology is the German social philosopher Jürgen Habermas. Among other things, Habermas devised a theory of 'communicative action' based on the deceptively simple notion that, when people make statements to each other ('speech acts'), they expect to be

understood. But asymmetrical power relations work systematically to distort such communication, giving rise to fundamental misunderstanding and a lack of debate. For instance, in employer–trade union discussions, the power imbalance favours employers; thus disputes are not settled rationally by the force of the better argument, as employers are able to use their power to impose a resolution. However, the solution is not to abandon modern ways of rational thinking, as some postmodern thinkers would have it, but to deepen modernity by defending and extending democracy and eliminating the inequalities of power and status that prevent equal, rational argumentation.

After the ending of the Soviet Union's communist regime in 1991, Marx's ideas, and Marxist theories generally, lost ground in sociology. Some even talked of a crisis in Marxist thought as a result of the demise of actually existing socialism and communism (Gamble 1999). However, the 2008 credit crisis and subsequent economic recession have reminded scholars that capitalism is an economic system that thrives on periodic booms and slumps. Though the Marxist theory of revolution may seem unsatisfactory, a broadly Marxist analysis of capitalist economies still plays a part in debates about social change. For instance, the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek (2011, 2012), while critical of some of Marx's ideas, which he melds with other theories, still argues that communism is the only genuine alternative to capitalism. Even in the twenty-first century, it seems, serious scholars are still engaging in a debate with Marx.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Why has the communist revolution, forecast by Marx, not materialized? List all the factors that have prevented the working class from revolting against capitalism. Can we say that this theory has been conclusively and definitively falsified?

Establishing sociology

Comte, Spencer, Marx and other early theorists laid some of the foundations for sociology's development, but there was no academic sociology in their time, and the subject had no institutional presence within universities. If sociology was to become part of Comte's 'hierarchy of the sciences', then it needed to carve out a place alongside the natural sciences in the academy, where sociological training could be offered to students. In short, sociology needed to become respectable, and Emile Durkheim's work in France went a long way towards achieving this. However, it took much longer for sociology to become established elsewhere.

Emile Durkheim: the social level of reality

Durkheim is a pivotal figure in the development of academic sociology. Like Marx, he moved decisively away from philosophy, which he saw as too far removed from the real issues of the day, and towards social science, which was able to clarify the moral questions facing French society. After working at the University of Bordeaux as the first professor of social science, Durkheim transferred to the Sorbonne in Paris and became the first ever professor of 'the science of education and sociology' (Coser 1977). Sociology was gaining a foothold in the academic establishment.

Durkheim also influenced the nature of the discipline itself. He saw that the study of specifically *social* phenomena was needed whenever research into people's behaviour went beyond individual interactions. Social institutions and social forms – such as social movements, organizations or the family – outlive the particular individuals who inhabit them, therefore they must have a reality of their own. This reality cannot adequately be understood by individualistic psychology or abstract philosophy. In Durkheim's terms, what we call 'the social' or social life is a level of reality *in its own right* that cannot be reduced to individual actions or thought of as a simple aggregate of individual minds.

Durkheim focused on group phenomena and social facts such as suicide rates, social solidarity and religion. People experienced social facts as 'things' external to the individual, rather like tables, bridges or buildings. The latter are all human creations, but their existence has to be taken into account and cannot be wished away. Similarly, social facts have a 'thing-like' existence which individuals must accept and take into account in their actions.

This thing-like reality of social facts means that the psychology of individuals was not the proper subject for sociology, which concerns itself with collective phenomena. For example, in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), Durkheim outlined his distinction between the *mechanical* forms of solidarity found in less complex societies and the *organic* form that characterizes large-scale, modern, industrial ones. Mechanical solidarity exists when individualism is minimized and the individual is subsumed within the collectivity. By contrast, organic solidarity is generated by the extensive division of labour in industrial societies, which produces many differences in work tasks, roles and statuses, but a strong form of cohesion is achieved because large groups of individuals in very different industries become dependent on each other.

Durkheim therefore rejected the idea – common at the time and since – that industrialism inevitably destroys social solidarity and threatens the fabric of society. In fact, *stronger* bonds of mutual interdependence are created under organic forms of solidarity, which have the potential to create a better balance between individual differences and collective purpose. Here we can see how Durkheim's scientific sociological analysis is closely tied to a moral and social problem of the day – how can industrial societies hold together in an age of increasing individualism?

Evaluation

Durkheim's approach to sociology is known as functionalism, the study of society and the way its institutions connect together and change. Yet, though it has been very influential in the past, functionalism is in retreat. There are several reasons why.

Many have argued that functionalism is good at explaining consensus – why societies hold together – but less effective in explaining conflict and radical social change. Others argue that Durkheimian functionalism prioritizes societies' constraints on people and does not allow enough room for the creative actions of individuals. Functional analysis also tends to impute 'purposes' and 'needs' to society itself. For example, we might say that the function of the education system is to train young people for the *needs* of a modern society. This seems to suggest that societies have 'needs' in the same way that people do. But is this really an adequate form of explanation? Modern economies may well require certain skills, but is the present education system the only or even the best way to provide them? What we really want to know is how, exactly, did the education system develop into its present form and could things have been different? Functionalism does not prioritize such questions.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Durkheim rejected the idea that sociologists should study individual psychology. Was he right? What is the appropriate subject matter for sociologists?

Twentieth-century structural functionalism

In the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, a version of functionalist theory known as structural functionalism became the central paradigm of sociology, though it was never totally dominant. It is hard for students today, who see sociology as a discipline that is *inevitably* pluralistic, argumentative and theoretically diverse, to appreciate just how different *doing* sociology was at that time. Sociology and structural functionalism were often seen as one and the same thing (Davis 1949). Two American sociologists stand out during this period: Robert Merton and his mentor, Talcott Parsons.

Parsons combined the ideas of Durkheim, Weber and Vilfredo Pareto into his own brand of structural functionalism, which began from the so-called problem of social order (Lee and Newby 1983). This asks how society can hold together when all the individuals within it are self-

interested and pursue their own wants and needs, often at the expense of others. Philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) answered this by saying that the emergence of the modern state, with all of its policing and military powers, was the crucial factor. The state protects individuals from one another and from external enemies, and, in return, citizens accept the state's legitimate right to exercise power over them.

Parsons rejected this solution. He recognized that conformity to social rules was not produced simply through the *negative* fear of punishment; people also conformed in *positive* ways, even teaching others the moral rules of society. Such a positive commitment to an orderly society shows that social rules are not just an external force acting on individuals but have become *internalized* during the process of socialization. Society exists not only 'out there' but 'in here' as well.

Having established the primacy of a sociological understanding of social order, Parsons turned his attention to the overall social system. He devised a model known as the AGIL paradigm (Parsons and Smelser 1956). If a social system (or society) is to continue, there are four basic functions it must perform. First, it must be capable of adapting to its environment, gathering enough resources to do so. Second, it must set out and put in place goals to be attained and the mechanisms for their achievement. Third, the system must be integrated and the various sub-systems must be effectively coordinated. Finally, the social system must have ways of preserving and transmitting its values and culture to new generations.

In less abstract terms, Parsons saw the *economic* sub-system performing an *adaptive* function, the *political* sub-system as setting society's *goals* and the means of attaining them, the *community* sub-system ('societal community') as doing *integrative* work, and the *educational* sub-system (and other socializing agencies) as transmitting *culture and values* – the latency function (see figure 3.1). Structural functionalism was a theory which gave priority to the overall system and its 'needs' and was always vulnerable to the charge that it overemphasized consensus and agreement. The task of solving this problem passed to Robert Merton, who pursued a more critical version of functionalism.

Merton saw that many sociological studies focused on either the macro level of society or the micro level of social interaction but failed to 'fill in the gaps' between macro and micro. To rectify this, he argued for middle-range theories of the meso level in particular areas or on specific subjects. An excellent example is his study of working-class criminality and deviance. Why was there so much acquisitive crime among the working classes? Merton's explanation was that, in an American society which promotes the cultural goal of material success but offers very few legitimate opportunities for lower social class groups, working-class criminality represented an adaptation to the circumstances in which many young people found themselves. The fact that they aimed to achieve the material success promoted by the system meant they were not evil or incapable of reform. Rather, it was the structure of society that needed to change. This thesis shows that Merton tried to develop functionalism in new directions, and, in doing so, he moved closer to conflict theory.

The social system

ADAPTATION FUNCTION

Economic sub-system

A

GOAL ATTAINMENT FUNCTION

Political sub-system

G

LATENCY FUNCTION

Education/socialization sub-system

L

INTEGRATIVE FUNCTION

Community sub-system

I
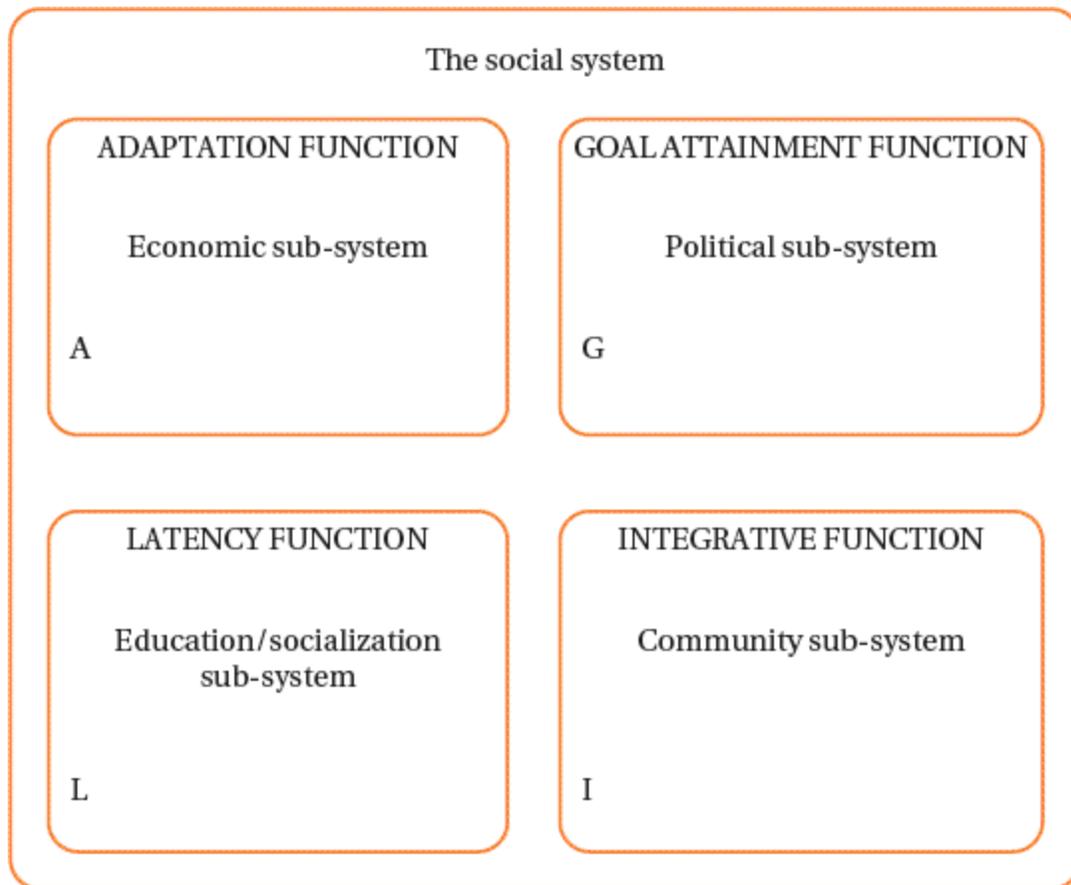
Figure 3.1 Parsons's AGIL scheme

Merton also distinguished between manifest and latent functions: the former are observable consequences of action, the latter are those that remain unspoken. In studying latent functions, Merton argued, we can learn much more about the way that societies work. For example, we might observe a rain dance among tribal people, the manifest function of which appears to be to bring about rain. But, empirically, the rain dance often fails and yet continues to be practised – why? Merton argues that its latent function is to build and sustain group solidarity, which is a continuing requirement. Similarly, Merton argued that institutions contained certain dysfunctional elements which create tensions, and the existence of these allowed him to discuss the potential for conflict in ways that Parsons could not.

See chapter 22, 'Crime and Deviance', for a more detailed discussion and critique of Merton's ideas.

What became of structural functionalism? Following the death of Parsons in 1979, Jeffrey Alexander (1985) sought to revisit and revive the approach, aiming to tackle its theoretical flaws. But, by 1997, even Alexander was forced to concede that the 'internal contradictions' of his 'new' or neofunctionalism could not be resolved. Instead, he argued for a reconstruction of sociological theory beyond functionalist assumptions (Alexander 1997). Hence, Parsonian structural functionalism is, to all intents and purposes, defunct within mainstream sociology.

Parsons's ideas became so influential because they spoke to the developed societies about their post-1945 situation of gradually rising affluence and political consensus. But they lost ground in the late 1960s and the 1970s as conflicts began to mount, with new peace and anti-nuclear movements, protests against American military involvement in Vietnam, and radical student movements emerging in Europe and North America. At that point, conflict theories, such as Marxism, were

reinvigorated, as they offered a better understanding of the new situation. As we will see later, understanding globalization, multiculturalism, shifting gender relations, risk and environmental degradation has led to a new round of theorizing today.

Merton sought to explain why a disproportionate amount of officially recorded acquisitive crime involved the working classes.

Max Weber: capitalism and religion

The third of the traditionally cited 'founding fathers' of European sociology, alongside Marx and Durkheim, is Max Weber, whose ideas stand behind many actor-centred approaches. His most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1992 [1904–5]), tackled a fundamental problem: why did capitalism originate in the West? For around thirteen centuries after the fall of ancient Rome, other civilizations were more prominent than those in the West. In fact, Europe was a rather insignificant part of the world, while China, India and the Ottoman Empire in the Near East were all major powers. China in particular was a long way ahead of the West in its level of

technological and economic development. So how did Europe's economies become so dynamic?

Weber reasoned that the key is to show what makes modern capitalism different from earlier types of economic activity. The desire to accumulate wealth can be found in many historical civilizations, and people have valued wealth for the comfort, security, power and enjoyment it can bring. Contrary to popular belief, capitalist economies are not simply a natural outgrowth of the desire for personal wealth. Something different must be at work.

Religion in the heart of capitalism?

Weber argued that, in the economic development of the West, the key difference is an attitude towards the accumulation of wealth that is found nowhere else in history. He called this attitude the 'spirit of capitalism' – a motivating set of beliefs and values held by the first capitalist merchants and industrialists. Yet, quite unlike wealthy people elsewhere, these industrialists did not spend their accumulated riches on luxurious, materialistic lifestyles. On the contrary, many of them were frugal and self-denying, living soberly without the trappings of affluence we are used to seeing today. This very unusual combination was vital to the rapid economic development of the West. The early capitalists reinvested their wealth to promote further expansion of their enterprises, and this continual reinvestment of profits produced a cycle of investment, production, profit and reinvestment, allowing capitalism to expand quickly.

The controversial part of Weber's theory is that the 'spirit of capitalism' actually had its origins in religion. The essential motivating force was provided by the impact of Protestantism and one variety in particular: Puritanism. The early capitalists were mostly Puritans and many subscribed to Calvinism. Calvinists believed that human beings are God's instruments on Earth, required by the Almighty to work in a vocation – an occupation for the greater glory of God. They also believed in predestination, according to which only certain individuals are among the 'elect' and will enter heaven in the afterlife. In Calvin's original doctrine, nothing a person does on Earth can alter whether they are one of the elect; this is predetermined by God. However, this

belief was difficult to live with and produced much anxiety among followers, leading to a constant search for 'signs' of election to quell salvation anxiety.

People's success when working in a vocation, indicated by their increasing prosperity, came to be seen as a sign that they were part of the elect few. Thus, a motivation towards profitability was generated as an unintended consequence of religious adherence, producing a paradoxical outcome. Puritans believed luxury to be evil, so their drive to accumulate wealth was combined with severe and unadorned personal lifestyles. This means the early capitalists were not self-conscious revolutionaries and did not set out to produce a capitalist revolution. Today, the idea of working in a calling has faded, and successful entrepreneurs have stupendous quantities of material goods and live luxurious lifestyles. In a famous passage, Weber (1992 [1904–5]: 182) says:

> The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so … Since asceticism undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals in the world, material goods have gained an increasingly and finally an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history…. The idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs.

Evaluation

Weber's theory has been criticized from many standpoints. Some have argued that 'the spirit of capitalism' can be seen in early Italian merchant cities of the twelfth century, long before Calvinism. Others claim that the idea of 'working in a vocation', which Weber associated with Protestantism, already existed within Catholic beliefs. Yet the essentials of Weber's account are accepted by many and the thesis he advanced remains bold and illuminating. If Weber's thesis is valid, then modern economic and social development has been decisively influenced by something that seems utterly distant from it – a set of religious ideals.

Weber's theory also meets important criteria for theoretical thinking in sociology. First, it suggests an interpretation that breaks with common

sense and develops a fresh perspective on an issue. Most scholars before Weber gave little thought to possible links between religious ideas and the origins of capitalism. Second, the theory makes sense of something that is otherwise puzzling: why would individuals want to live frugally while making great efforts to accumulate wealth? Third, the theory sheds light on circumstances beyond those it was created to explain. Weber tried to grasp the origins of modern capitalism, but it seems reasonable to suppose that parallel values could be part of societies which became capitalist much later. Finally, a good theory is not just valid but also fruitful in generating new ideas and stimulating further research. Weber's theory has been highly successful in all these respects, providing the springboard for a large amount of research and theoretical analysis. Weber's approach to sociology was also an important stimulus to many later theories which place human actors at the centre of their analyses, and we look at some of these in the next section.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Many students (and their teachers) find Weber's theory of the religious origins of capitalism endlessly fascinating. But how, if at all, is it relevant to our understanding of the operation of global consumer capitalism today?

Symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology

This section moves on to outline some important perspectives that put human actors and social interaction at the centre of the analysis. A significant early exponent of this perspective is Georg Simmel (1858–1918), often described as the 'first sociologist of modernity', on account of his work on the experience of modern city life (discussed in chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life'). Simmel saw sociology as a discipline concerned primarily with the different forms of social interactions, or 'sociation' (Frisby 2002). His broadly interactionist ideas influenced the work of many peers and future sociologists. This section looks at some

key ideas from symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology. Although there are important differences between them, as a group they contrast with the structural theories in sociology we have looked at so far.

George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) is credited with laying the foundations for an approach known as *symbolic interactionism*, a general label covering approaches that investigate social interactions with a focus on language and symbols. Interactionists often reject the very idea that social structures exist objectively, and they do not focus on them in their work. Herbert Blumer (who coined the term 'symbolic interactionism') argued that all talk of social structures or social systems is unjustified, as only individuals and their interactions can really be said to 'exist' at all.

Symbolic interactionism focuses on micro-level interactions and the ways in which meanings are constructed and transmitted. Mead (1934) argued that the individual person is in fact a social self, produced during interaction processes rather than being biologically given. His theory traces the emergence and development of the self through a series of stages in childhood, and his ideas of the social self underpin much interactionist research (see chapter 14, 'The Life Course', for a detailed discussion of Mead's ideas). Recognizing that humans use symbols in communication is a basic premise of the approach.

A symbol is something that refers to or stands for something else, so words, gestures or objects can all be used to convey meaning during interactions. However, the same symbol can convey different meanings, even in the same setting. A wedding ring, for instance, may be interpreted by one person as a sign of love and commitment but by their spouse as signifying a loss of freedom. The symbolic character of human communication marks it out as different from most animal behaviour, which involves responses to objective stimuli. Human interactions are not simply automatic behavioural responses but involve symbols in the creation of meaning.

The centre of symbolic interactionism for some thirty years until 1950 was the University of Chicago's Department of Sociology (known as the Chicago School), though by no means all Chicago sociologists were

interactionists. The department was also home to the 'ecological' approach of Louis Wirth, Robert E. Park and Ernest Burgess (see chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life', for a discussion of this approach). Nonetheless, having an institutional base was important in popularizing the approach.

Arguably, the most successful symbolic interactionist is Erving Goffman (1922–82). Goffman's studies of mental 'asylums', processes of stigmatization and the ways in which people present their selves in social encounters have become sociological classics, as much for their methodology and observational style as for their findings. In developing his 'dramaturgical analysis', which works with the metaphor of the theatre, Goffman has had a wide influence on sociology students across the world.

Meeting people is a normal occurrence, but interactionists are fascinated by the rituals and unspoken assumptions in play during such an everyday phenomenon.

[Phenomenology]() is an actor-centred perspective which deals with the ways in which social life is actually experienced. Literally, phenomenology is the systematic study of phenomena – things as they appear in our experience. Its roots in sociology lie in the philosophical work of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl, though in sociological research the Austrianborn philosopher and sociologist Alfred Schutz (1899–1959) has been more important. Schutz concentrated on people's experience of everyday life and the ways in which this comes to be 'taken for granted' as part of the [lifeworld]() – the world as routinely experienced and lived as 'natural'. Schutz refers to this routine acceptance of the world as adopting a 'natural attitude'. For him, the task of phenomenological sociology is to understand better how this happens and what its consequences are.

Schutz was interested in *typifications* – the ways in which experienced phenomena are classified according to previous experience. [Typification]() is commonplace. When we meet someone we perhaps think, 'Oh, so she's *that* kind of person', or 'He seems an honest type'. Typification helps to order our world and make it more predictable and therefore 'safe'. But if this becomes stereotypification it can also be dangerous – the illegitimate generalization about people based simply on their membership of a certain social group. Examples of stereotyping are racism, sexism and negative attitudes towards disabled people. However, the focus of Schutz's work was on the ways in which these interaction processes produce typifications, not the positive or negative consequences of the latter.

Individuals also tend to make the assumption that everyone thinks in much the same way as they do and that they can safely forget about problems of interpersonal communication. Once assumptions of this

kind become internalized, they are sedimented below the surface of conscious existence, forming the basis of the natural attitude. In this way, people experience important aspects of the social world, such as language and culture, as objective and external to themselves, and 'society' (as Durkheim suggested) is taken as a thing-like entity, separate from the individual. Phenomenology has not had the same impact on sociology as some of the other perspectives, though it did give rise to ethnomethodology.

Ethnomethodology – the systematic study of the methods used by 'natives' (members of a particular society) to construct their social worlds – is a third interactionist perspective. Its roots can be traced back to phenomenological philosophy, but it rose to prominence only in the 1960s with the research studies of Harold Garfinkel (1917–2011) and Aaron Cicourel (1928–). Ethnomethodologists were highly critical of mainstream sociology, particularly Parsonian structural functionalism, which Garfinkel thought treated people as if they were 'cultural dopes' – passive recipients of society's socializing agents – rather than creative actors. Garfinkel also took issue with Durkheim's famous statement that sociologists should 'treat social facts as things'. For Garfinkel, this should be the starting point for inquiry, not assumed in advance of it. Ethnomethodology seeks to uncover just how social facts are created by society's members and come to have that thing-like quality, and much of its analysis is of conversation, which sets ethnomethodology apart from other interactionist sociologies.

Ethnomethodology is discussed more widely in chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life'.

In contrast to many other actor-oriented perspectives, the work of Max Weber explores both individual actions and social structures. Although he was certainly interested in social interactions and the micro level of social life, his work on world religions, economic sociology and legal

systems was historically informed, strongly comparative and concerned with the overall development and direction of societies. This is in contrast to the interactionist tradition as it developed after Weber, which became focused much more on the micro level of social life. The approaches in this section illustrate a basic difference in classical sociology between micro-level and structural (or macro-level) perspectives, which remains one of sociology's longstanding theoretical divides.

Challenging mainstream sociology

The question of the continuing relevance of sociology's three broad traditions has come into sharper focus as theoretical challenges have emerged. Some of these have transformed the discipline while others are in the process of doing so today. In this section we briefly outline some important criticisms of sociology from the standpoint of feminism, which stresses sociological theory's previous neglect of the experience of women. We then cover ideas rooted in postmodern and poststructural theory and end the section with postcolonial theories, which focus on the inherent Eurocentric bias within most social and sociological theories.

Feminism against malestream sociology

The accepted founders of sociology were all men (as we saw in chapter 1), and they paid scant regard either to the differential experience of men and women or to gender relations. In any event, their ideas tended to be descriptive and theoretically unsatisfactory. For example, differences between women and men are discussed occasionally in Durkheim's writings, but not in a consistently sociological manner (Rahman and Jackson 2010: 56). Durkheim (1952 [1897]) suggested that, while men are 'almost entirely' products of society, women are 'to a far greater extent' products of nature, leading to differing bases for identities, tastes and inclinations. Sociologists today do not accept this stereotypical conclusion, which illegitimately essentializes female identities.

Marx and Engels's ideas are substantially at odds with those of Durkheim. For them, differences in power and status between men and women mainly reflect other divisions, especially class divisions. According to Marx, in the earliest forms of human society (primitive communism), neither gender nor class divisions were present. The power of men over women came about only as class divisions appeared. Women then came to be seen as a type of 'private property', owned by men through the institution of marriage. The only way for women to be

freed from their situation of bondage would be when capitalism is overthrown and class divisions are eliminated.

Again, few sociologists today would accept this analysis. Class is not the only factor shaping social divisions which affect relations between men and women; among others are ethnicity and cultural background. For instance, it might be argued that women in some minority ethnic groups have more in common with men in that group than they do with women in the ethnic majority. In recent years, sociologists have become much more interested in intersectionality – the ways in which divisions of class, gender and ethnicity combine or 'intersect' to produce complex forms of social inequality (Brewer 1993; P. H. Collins 2000). Intersectionality does not mean the end of class analysis, but it does point to the need for more research which crosses conventional theoretical boundaries.

Since it left very little to build on in relating issues of gender to more established forms of theoretical thinking, the classical legacy bequeathed a difficult problem to sociologists. How should 'gender' as a general category be brought within existing sociological theories? The issues involved here are important and bear directly on the challenge that feminist scholars have laid down. There is no real dispute that a great deal of sociology in the past either ignored women or operated with an inadequate understanding of gender relations. Yet bringing the study of women into sociology is not the same as dealing with issues of gender, because gender concerns relations between women *and* men. For example, research into gender has explored changing forms of masculinity as well as femininities, and, with the emergence of queer theory, the instability of the concept of gender itself has been exposed.

The next section presents a fairly brief outline of the impact of feminist theorizing on sociology, but an extended discussion of gender can be found in chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality'. Taken together, these sections provide an introduction to the significance of gender in society and for sociology.

Feminist theories

Women's movements in the 1960s and 1970s campaigned for many legislative changes aimed at tackling the unequal position of women in society. Once feminist scholars became part of the academy within universities, [feminist theories](#) challenged male-dominated or [malestream sociology](#). The latter involved a perceived male bias in sociological theorizing that drew general conclusions from the experience of men – research methods that were not designed to capture women's experience. Sociology's subject matter, which focused on the (male-dominated) public sphere, ignored the perceived female-oriented private sphere of households and families. One feminist slogan of the time was 'the personal is political', and, as such, previously considered private matters became legitimate subjects for sociology.

Some feminist sociologists also called for a comprehensive reconstruction of the entire discipline, including the central problems that form its core, emphasizing the centrality of gender for any satisfactory analysis of the social world. In short,

> The feminist challenge to malestream sociology is one that requires a radical rethink of the content and methodology of the whole enterprise; one that recognises the need, not simply to see society from the standpoint of women as well as from the standpoint of men, but to see the world as fundamentally gendered. (Abbott et al. 2005: 3)

How far sociology has moved in this direction is contentious. For instance, as late as 2003, Sara Delamont still argued that her battle to get mainstream sociologists to acknowledge feminist theorizing was 'far from won' (Delamont 2003: ix). Yet it is also the case that there are many disagreements across feminist perspectives on just how issues of gender should or can be theorized. 'Feminist theory' is a term covering an increasing range of positions, with at least six or seven different perspectives. These range from early theories of liberal, socialist/Marxist and radical feminism, through dual-systems and critical feminism, to postmodern/poststructuralist, black and postcolonial feminism. Most of these perspectives are discussed in more detail in [chapter 7](#), 'Gender and Sexuality'.

The diversity of feminist theories makes it impossible to speak of a single or unified 'feminist theory of society', but we can say they all agree that knowledge is related to questions of sex and gender and that women face oppression in patriarchal societies. However, theoretical explanations of women's position differ, sometimes quite markedly. For example, while radical feminists see patriarchy as the main source of oppression, dual-systems theorists argue that both patriarchy and capitalism combine to reproduce male dominance. Black feminism both insists that race, racism and ethnicity need to be part of feminist theorizing and criticizes earlier theories for assuming that all women have essentially similar interests despite their radically divergent living conditions.

Because men and women have different experiences and view the world from different perspectives, they do not construct their understandings of the world in identical ways. Feminists often argue that malestream sociological theory has denied or ignored the 'gendered' nature of knowledge, producing supposedly universal conclusions from the specific experience of (usually white) men. As men conventionally occupy the main positions of power and authority in most societies, they have an investment in maintaining their privileged position. Under such conditions, gendered knowledge becomes a vital force in perpetuating established social arrangements and legitimating continued male domination.

Some feminist scholars influenced by poststructuralist or postmodern thinking (discussed below), including Donna Haraway (1989, 1991), Hélène Cixous (1976) and Judith Butler (1990, 1997, 2004), have argued that it is a mistake to suppose that either 'men' or 'women' are even distinct groups with interests or characteristics. According to Butler (2004), gender itself is not a fixed category or an essence, but something fluid that is exhibited through what people *do* rather than what they *are*. If, as Butler (1990) argues, gender is something that is 'done' or performed, then it is also something that can be 'undone' when it is used by one group to exert power over another (see chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life').

Is there, in fact, *any* essential gendered being at all, or is 'gender' in a constant process of social construction with no fixed biological

foundations? Such foundational questions illustrate how far feminist thinking has travelled, though some see these matters as of secondary importance to tackling inequality and improving the material conditions of life for women, particularly in developing countries (Shiva 1993). Rahman and Jackson (2010: 81) argue that

> We live today within a global context characterized by extremely stark and worsening inequalities – and it is often women who are most disadvantaged by the intersections between global and local exploitation … Differences among women are not merely 'cultural'; the most significant of them are founded upon real, material inequalities deriving from institutionalized racism, the heritage of centuries of slavery, colonialism and imperialism and local and global divisions of labour.

Feminist theory has developed markedly since the 1970s, and some of the themes pursued today are quite different from the material feminism that emerged within 'second-wave' feminist movements. However, what these differing perspectives show is that feminist thinking has not stood still but continues to develop and expand into new areas.

Black feminism – both within academia and in social activism, such as the Southall Black Sisters shown here – challenges the idea that all women share similar experiences and have the same interests.

Feminist movements are discussed further in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Increasing recognition of the diverse experiences of women and gender fluidity has generated new debates within feminism. But if the central categories of 'men' and 'women' are themselves undergoing challenge, what does it mean to be a feminist today?

Poststructuralism and postmodernity

Michel Foucault (1926–84), Jacques Derrida (1976, 1978) and Julia Kristeva (1984, 1977) are the most influential figures in an intellectual movement known as poststructuralism. However, Foucault's ideas have had the most influence on sociology and the social sciences. In his writings on crime, the body, madness and sexuality, Foucault analysed the emergence of modern institutions, such as prisons, hospitals and schools, that have played an increasing role in monitoring and controlling the population. He wanted to show that there was a darker side to Enlightenment ideals of individual liberty – one concerned with discipline and surveillance. Foucault advanced important ideas about the relationship between power, ideology and discourse in modern organizational systems.

The study of power is of fundamental importance in sociology, and Foucault continued some of the lines of thought pioneered in classical sociology. The role of discourse is central to his thinking, and he used the term to refer to ways of talking or thinking about particular subjects that are united by common assumptions. Foucault demonstrated, for example, the dramatic way in which discourses of madness changed from medieval times through to the present day. In the Middle Ages the insane were generally regarded as harmless, and some believed that they may even have possessed a special 'gift' of perception. In modern societies, however, 'madness' has been shaped by a scientific, medicalized discourse which emphasizes illness and treatment. This discourse is supported and perpetuated by a highly developed and influential network of doctors, medical experts, hospitals, professional associations and medical journals.

Foucault's work is discussed in more detail in chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability'.

According to Foucault, power works through discourse to shape public attitudes. Expert discourses established by those with power or

authority can often be countered only by competing expert discourses. In this way, discourses can be used as powerful tools to restrict alternative ways of thinking or speaking and knowledge becomes a force of control. A prominent theme throughout Foucault's writings is the way power and knowledge are linked to technologies of surveillance, enforcement and discipline. In sociology, this perspective has expanded the way sociologists think about power relations in many areas of the discipline.

Since the mid-1980s, advocates of postmodernism claim that the classic social thinkers took their inspiration from the idea that history has a shape – it 'goes somewhere' and is progressive. But this idea has now collapsed and there are no longer any 'metanarratives' – overall conceptions of history or society – that make any sense (Lyotard 1984). The postmodern world is not destined, as Marx hoped, to be a harmonious socialist one. Similarly, the idea that science would lead inexorably to social progress is much less plausible in an age of nuclear weaponry and global warming. Democracy has spread around the world, but in many developed political systems voters are apathetic and politicians reviled. In short, for many postmodern theorists, the grand project of modernity has run into the sand.

For Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), the postmodern age is a world where people respond to media images rather than to real persons or places. Thus when Diana, princess of Wales, died in 1997, there was an enormous outpouring of grief all over the world. But was this the mourning of a real person? Princess Diana existed for most people only through the mass media, and her death was presented like an event in a soap opera rather than an event in real life. Separating out reality from representation has become impossible when all that exists is 'hyperreality' – the intertwining of the two.

See chapter 19, 'The Media', for a discussion of Baudrillard and hyperreality.

Zygmunt Bauman (1992) offers a helpful distinction between two ways of thinking about the postmodern. Do we need a sociology of postmodernity or a postmodern sociology? The first view accepts that the social world has moved rapidly in a postmodern direction. The enormous growth and spread of the mass media, new information technologies, the more fluid movement of people across the world and the development of multicultural societies – all of these mean that we no longer live in a modern world but in a postmodern one. However, on this view there is no compelling reason to think that sociology cannot describe, understand and explain the emerging postmodern world.

The second view suggests that the type of sociology which successfully analysed the modern world of capitalism, industrialization and nation-states is no longer capable of dealing with the de-centred, pluralistic, mediasaturated, globalizing postmodern world, and new theories and concepts will have to be devised. In short, we need a *postmodern sociology* for a postmodern world. It remains unclear what such a sociology would look like.

Bauman accepts that the modern project originating in the European Enlightenment of rationally shaping society no longer makes sense, at least not in the way thought possible by Comte, Marx or other classical theorists. However, from the turn of the century he moved away from the term 'postmodern' – which he argued had become corrupted through too diverse usage – and instead described our age as one of 'liquid modernity', reflecting the fact that it is in constant flux and uncertainty *in spite of* all attempts to impose (a modern) order and stability onto it (Bauman 2000, 2007).

Many sociologists do not believe that we are entering a postmodern age at all. One staunch critic is Jürgen Habermas (1983), who sees

modernity as 'an incomplete project'. Instead of consigning it to the dustbin of history, we should be extending it, pushing for *more* democracy, *more* freedom and *more* rational policies. Postmodernists, Habermas argues, are essentially pessimists and defeatists. Whichever view you think more plausible, postmodern analyses have in fact lost ground to the theory of globalization, which has become the dominant backdrop for understanding the direction of social change today. Taking a global view of the development of sociology has led to new critiques which argue that sociology has been and remains Eurocentric, failing to acknowledge the impact of colonialism on knowledge production and dissemination.

Postmodern theory is exemplified by Baudrillard's ideas on the domination of social life by television. Does the theory still work in relation to the rapid take-up and use of social media?

Decolonizing sociology

Feminist scholarship charged sociology and sociological theory with the neglect of the core issue of gender. Something similar might be argued in relation to disability, sexuality and ethnicity, though today much has changed in all of these areas. However, questions have been raised about yet another 'missing revolution' in sociology, namely the neglect of the major and continuing impact of colonialism on the development of both societies and sociology. For example, our presentation of the development of sociology in this section may be criticized for its Eurocentrism, focusing on the contribution of European (and some North American) theorists while neglecting the contribution of scholars from Asia, Africa and elsewhere in the world. Bringing the latter back into the story of sociology is one aspect of a developing postcolonial or decolonial sociology (Bhambra 2007).

Postcolonial theories are diverse, but their central concern is to explore the ways in which the legacy of European colonialism remains active in both societies and academic disciplines, long after former colonies have achieved independence. Postcolonial studies attempt to expose this continuing legacy and to transform the discipline's core concepts and theories, which previously failed to take account of colonial and postcolonial relationships. For example, standard accounts of the origins of sociology (including that in chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?') list the Industrial and French revolutions as formative for sociology but give no weight to the significance of colonialism and imperialism in the shaping of modern societies. Similarly, postcolonial critics argue that, because sociology emerged as an integral part of European modernity, the sociological gaze was and still is a Eurocentric one, limited to the analysis of 'modern' societies, but failing to incorporate the experience

of the colonized societies. Sociology and the curriculum, they say, are badly in need of 'decolonization' (Connell 2018).

In a parallel way, sociological theory focused on explaining the emergence of modernity and analysing its radical difference from previous societies. This is evident in the work of Marx on Western capitalism, Durkheim on mechanical and organic solidarity, and Weber's thesis of Protestantism and the origins of capitalism. But, in doing so, early sociologists effectively characterized non-European societies as 'pre-modern' or in some way 'traditional'. From the late nineteenth century, this created a disciplinary division of labour, with sociology focusing on modern, industrial societies and anthropology dealing with the non-European and non-modern world (Boatca? and Costa 2010). Anthropology was forced to acknowledge the impact of colonial regimes and, later, the postcolonial situation, but sociology sidestepped any systematic engagement with colonialism, imperialism and postcolonial relations between states.

Many postcolonial accounts seek to enable previously marginalized people and viewpoints – the [subalterns](#) – to participate on equal terms to reshape disciplines such as sociology. The problem was starkly illustrated in an early, classic postcolonial work, Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism*, which criticized Western academic studies of 'the Orient' or 'the East'. Said took issue with Orientalists, scholars in the so-called Area Studies tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, who analysed the Middle East, Africa and Asia. Their discussions of the Orient relied on a sharp contrast with the Occident ('the West'), where the Orient was seen as the exotic 'Other' to the 'normal' and superior Occident. To put this another way, academics in the West produced what were perceived to be authoritative accounts of the East, but without any input from indigenous people or scholars.

Said argued that Oriental Studies operated with the assumption that Eastern societies, as a group, shared some essential similarities which enabled them to be discussed collectively, while at the same time they were very different from Western cultures. This contrast was then used to 'explain' the failure of the Orient to modernize. Following Foucault's ideas on the power of discourses in society, Said saw academic Orientalism as one aspect of a societywide discourse of Western

superiority, which supported the political and economic colonial regimes on the ground. Far from being an objective, politically neutral and scholarly activity, Orientalism was one way in which the West exerted its authority over the countries of the East.

You may think that contemporary sociology has moved far beyond the early Eurocentrism, as globalization has forced sociologists to take a much broader view and to study developing countries as well as the industrialized ones. However, postcolonial theorists argue that even contemporary theories remain stuck in older ways of thinking. For example, many globalization theories see the process involving capitalism and industrialism spreading outwards from the West into 'the rest' of the world, taking with it fundamental features of Western culture. Seen this way, sociological theorizing is then able to continue with 'business as usual', without revising its core concepts and theories. You will have to reach your own conclusions as to how far this conclusion is accurate.

Recent feminist and postcolonial critiques demand a rethinking of the very foundations of sociology. However, not everyone agrees that this is either possible or necessary. First, the fact that this textbook and others cover gender relations, feminist theories, disability, sexualities and ethnicity alongside global inequalities, nations and nationalism, war, and much more, shows that sociology has not been immune to social trends, developing theories and changing attitudes. Indeed, sociology is a discipline that *has* to change and 'move with the times' if it is to be relevant in the rapidly changing social world. The question is whether it moves far enough and fast enough.

Second, internal debates within feminist theory and postcolonialism mean that their critiques of sociology have also changed over time. As McLennan (2010: 119) argues, 'it is important to be realistic, and to resist any overbearing moralism; all thought systems are inevitably ethnocentric in focus, style and available expertise. Moreover, what it even *means* to "decolonize" or to "postcolonialize" sociology is far from crystal clear.' Similarly, postcolonial theory entails a critique or rejection of the central sociological concept of 'modernity', which aims to characterize the experience of most Western societies but also presents the associated process of modernization as spreading

outwards to 'the rest' of the world. The perceived Eurocentrism of this position has led many sociologists to abandon the concept altogether. Yet, as Fourie (2012: 53) argues, 'switch on a television, open a newspaper or stroll through any city and one is likely to encounter the term or its variants; clearly "modernity is in the streets more than ever" (Kaya 2004: 47), and so continues to shape our understanding of the world around us.'

The ongoing debate around modernity, modernization and alternatives such as postcolonialism shows that even sociology's foundational concepts can still be questioned and opened up again for investigation. Yet, some key issues about how sociology can and should be practised seem to endure amid all of the critiques and change, and we look at just two of these next.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Anthropologists conventionally study societies outside of the industrialized world. Should sociologists then simply accept that, given its origins, sociology is best suited to the study of modern societies? Does globalization effectively eliminate this academic division of labour?

Enduring theoretical dilemmas

From its inception, sociology has faced some theoretical dilemmas – matters of recurring controversy and dispute. These concern general approaches that pose questions about how we *can* or *should* 'do' sociology, and two have proved remarkably persistent: the problem of structure and agency and the issue of consensus versus conflict.

The first dilemma concerns the relative weight we should afford to social structure and human agency. How far are individuals creative actors capable of controlling the conditions of their lives? Is most of what we do the product of social forces outside individual control? This is considered a 'problem' because sociologists are divided on where the focus should be. Actionoriented approaches stress the active, creative side of human behaviour, while functionalism and some variants of Marxism emphasize the constraining nature of social structures.

The second dilemma concerns consensus and conflict. Some theories see the inherent order and harmony of human societies as their most enduring aspect. On this view, continuity and consensus are the most striking characteristics of societies, however much those societies change over time. Others see the pervasiveness of conflict as part of the basic fabric of social life rather than as an unusual or transitory aspect. Societies, they argue, are riven with social divisions, tensions and struggles, and it is wishful thinking to believe that people live amicably most of the time. We will take these two dilemmas in turn.

Social structure and human agency

Durkheim argued that society has primacy over the individual person as it is more than the sum of individual acts; it has a 'firmness' or 'solidity' comparable to structures in the material environment. Think of a person in a room with several doors. The structure of the room constrains the range of possible activities. The siting of the walls and the doors defines the routes of exit and entry. Social structure sets similar limits to what we can do, and in this sense it is 'external' to the individual. Durkheim (1982 [1895]: 50) expresses the point this way:

When I perform my duties as a brother, a husband or a citizen and carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfil obligations which are defined in law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions…. Similarly, the believer has discovered from birth, ready fashioned, the beliefs and practices of his religious life; if they existed before he did, it follows that they exist outside him. The systems of signs that I employ to express my thoughts, the monetary system I use to pay my debts, the credit instruments I utilize in my commercial relationships, the practices I follow in my profession, etc. – all function independently of the use I make of them.

Although this structural perspective has many adherents, it has also met with sharp criticism. What is 'society' if it is not the composite of many individual actions? If we study a social group we do not see a collective entity or 'thing', just many individuals interacting with one another in various ways. In the same way, what we call 'society' is only an aggregate of individuals behaving in regular ways in relation to one another. According to interactionists, human beings have reasons for what they do, and they inhabit a social world constructed by meanings. Social phenomena are *not* like 'things' but depend on the symbolic meanings we invest in them, which means we are not at the mercy of an external 'society' but are instead its creators.

Yet the differences between structure and agency perspectives can be exaggerated, and we can easily see connections between them. Social structures do precede and constrain the individual. For example, I did not invent the monetary system I use, nor do I have a choice about whether I want to use it if I wish to have the goods and services money can buy. On the other hand, it is mistaken to suppose that society is 'external' in the same way as the physical world. The physical world would still exist if no human beings were alive, but the monetary system would not. Moreover, 'social facts' do not entirely *determine* our actions. I could choose to live without using money, even if it proved very difficult to eke out an existence. As human beings, we can make choices and do not simply respond passively to events.

An antiques and vintage market demonstrates structure and agency in economic exchanges. Buyers are constrained to pay using an established currency (structure), but final prices are not fixed and can be bartered (agency).

Beyond structure and agency?

The divide between structural and agency perspectives is seen as unproductive by many sociologists, and several attempts have been made to bring them together in one theoretical perspective. Here we look briefly at just two of the more successful attempts, in the contrasting approaches of Norbert Elias and Anthony Giddens. Pierre Bourdieu's equally influential ideas are covered in detail in chapter 16, 'Education'.

Norbert Elias and figurational sociology

The German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) saw the structure–agency dilemma as a hangover from earlier philosophical ways of

thinking and an obstacle to be overcome. Sociology inherited this 'problem' from philosophy, which left a series of other dualisms, such as mind–body, individual–society and micro–macro. Sociological theorists tended to defer to the expertise of philosophers in matters of logic and assessing the validity of knowledge claims. But, for Elias, sociology is a distinct theoretical-empirical science that produces a more empirically adequate knowledge, and therefore sociologists do not need philosophers to adjudicate for them (Kilminster 2007).

The structure–agency dilemma is unhelpful and inaccurate (as are all other such dualisms). For example, the distinction between individual and society implies that each has a 'thing-like' existence and that the individual is distinct from society. But discussing social life using these terms is misleading because 'they encourage the impression that society is made up of structures external to oneself, the individual, and the individual is at one and the same time surrounded by society yet cut off from it by some invisible barrier' (Elias 1978: 15).

Elias argues that sociology studies *people* (in the plural), who are always in networks or relations of interdependence. Elias calls these interdependent networks figurations, and the approach he pioneered is known as figurational studies or, sometimes, process sociology (Mennell 1998). This theoretical move is deceptively simple. But, if we *start* from social figurations, then radical conclusions follow. The individual person is not an autonomous, 'closed' being entombed within a physical body, coming into contact with others only during interactions, a little like snooker balls colliding. Elias argues that human beings are 'open people', whose individual identities and 'selves' are socially produced in networks of social relations – they are social selves (Burkitt 2008).

On the other hand, the 'thing' that is routinely called 'society' is not a thing at all but is, in reality, a long-term social process of ever-changing figurations (Van Krieken 1998: 5–6). A long-term perspective is necessary because it is only by tracing the development of social life in the past that we can arrive at a realistic understanding of the present and of ourselves. Elias insists that a figurational perspective, which focuses attention on this continual social process, is a clear advance over theories which discuss 'society' as a static thing-like entity.

For example, in *The Civilizing Process* (2000 [1939]), Elias traces the development of 'civilized' codes of manners, such as etiquette at the dinner table, from the European Middle Ages onwards. These codes first developed in the royal courts, where people were expected to control their behaviour and emotions, but subsequently spread to other social classes through a process of status competition. Hence, the rather strange habits and customs of people in previous times are not just historical curiosities unrelated to modern life. In fact, we can never understand why the standards we accept as 'natural' exist unless we appreciate how they developed over very long periods of time.

See 'Classic studies' 21.1 in chapter 21, 'Nations, War and Terrorism', for a discussion of Elias's 'civilizing process' theory, which shows how he handles social structures and individual actions.

Elias's figurational perspective does not try to 'bridge' the structure–agency dilemma in sociology. Rather, it effectively dissolves the 'problem' altogether. There is no need for sociologists to focus exclusively on the micro level of small-scale interactions or the macro level of social structures and institutions. Understanding the shifting figurations formed by interdependent people means we have to be concerned with every aspect of human life, from individual personalities to the large figurations represented by the concepts of nation-state or the city.

One often-repeated criticism is that Elias tends to see 'society' as largely the unintended outcome of many intentional actions. Yet this may not give enough weight to the influence of very powerful actors such as states, social movements or multinational corporations in shaping society in their interests (Van Krieken 1998). Nevertheless, figurational sociology has developed into a thriving research tradition which has produced some fascinating studies.

Anthony Giddens and structuration theory

An alternative way of tackling this dilemma was developed by Anthony Giddens. Unlike Elias, Giddens (1984: vii) does not reject philosophy, arguing that sociology must be 'alive' to philosophical problems: 'The social sciences are lost if they are not directly related to philosophical problems by those who practise them.' Debates in philosophy can contribute to our understanding of social life and should not be ignored. However, Giddens also adopts a central focus on the *structuring* activity of individual actions, which bears some similarity to Elias's interest in social processes.

Giddens's approach begins from the recognition that people actively make and remake social structure during the course of their everyday activities. For instance, the fact that I use the monetary system contributes in a minor, yet essential way to the very existence of that system. If everyone, or even a majority of people, at some point decided not to use money, the 'thing-like' monetary system would collapse. A useful concept for analysing such processes is [structuration](#) (Giddens 1984). Structuration theory holds that 'structure' and 'action' are necessarily related to each other and are not opposites. Societies, communities and groups have 'structure' only insofar as people behave in regular and fairly predictable ways. On the other hand, 'action' is only possible because each individual possesses an enormous amount of socially structured knowledge which pre-exists them as individuals.

Take the example of language. To exist at all, language must be structured – that is, it must have properties which every speaker must observe. What someone says in any given context would not make sense unless it followed certain grammatical rules. Yet the structural qualities of language exist only insofar as individual language users actually follow those rules in practice. We can say that language, as with other social institutions, is constantly in the process of structuration.

Interactionists are quite right to suggest that human agents are highly knowledgeable actors. Social life demands that we follow complex sets of conventions, such as the rituals strangers observe when passing by or meeting in the street. On the other hand, as we apply that knowledge to our own actions, we give force and content to those rules and

conventions on which we draw. Structuration always presumes this 'duality of structure' in which all social action presumes the existence of structure. But, at the same time, structure presumes action because it depends on regularities of human behaviour.

This resolution to the structure–agency problem has its critics. One issue is the relative weight afforded to structure and agency in particular settings. Despite the laudable attempt to bridge the divide, Giddens's structuration theory does seem to put heavy emphasis on the structuring power of actors in shaping social life. Even though social structures are seen as effective, structuration theory still views human agency as capable of changing and reshaping them, however powerful or long established they may be. But the extent to which this is true cannot be decided in advance of empirical research into concrete cases.

Margaret Archer (1995, 2003) is sympathetic to structuration theory but sees Giddens's theoretical discussion as overly descriptive. It is not enough simply to note that structure and agency are co-constitutive (that one implies the other). Sociological explanations need to establish whether structure or agency is the *cause* of social phenomena in particular cases. The continuous interplay of structure and agency that Giddens rightly identifies has a definite chronological sequence: existing social structure → individual actions → modified social structure, and so on. In tracing this continuous sequence in specific studies, it should be possible to discover whether structure or agency is more effective.

It seems unlikely that the structure–agency problem will ever be resolved to the satisfaction of all sociologists, especially as various perspectives and theories lie closer to one side or the other of the dilemma. Individual sociologists also lean towards structure or agency perspectives depending on their own social backgrounds and life experiences. Nonetheless, the two approaches discussed above are evidence of a desire to take some of the heat out of this longstanding problem.

Consensus versus conflict

The second enduring dilemma is that of consensus versus conflict. For all functionalist thinkers, society is treated as an integrated whole, composed of structures or institutions which mesh closely with one another. This is very much in accord with Durkheim's focus on the constraining, 'external' character of 'social facts'. However, the analogy here is not with the walls of a building but with the physiology of the human body.

The body consists of various specialized parts, such as the brain, heart, lungs, liver, and so on, each of which contributes to sustaining the continuing life of the whole organism. These necessarily work in harmony with one another; if they do not, the life of the organism is under threat. Similarly, for a society to have a continuing existence over time, its specialized institutions, such as the political system, religion, the family and the educational system, must all work in harmony with one another. This is a consensus perspective, which focuses on how societies hold together.

Those who focus mainly on conflict have a very different outlook. Their guiding assumptions can be seen in Marx's theory of class conflict. According to Marx, societies are divided into classes with unequal resources and, since marked inequalities exist, there are divisions of interest that are 'built into' the social system. These conflicts at some point break out into active social change. Since Marx, others have identified gender and ethnic divisions or political differences as sources of conflict. For conflict theorists, society inevitably contains divisions and tensions regardless of which social groups are stronger than others.

As with the case of structure and action, it is unlikely that this theoretical dispute can be resolved fully. Yet, once more, the differences between consensus and conflict standpoints may not be as wide as it appears. All societies probably have some loose, general agreement on values, and all certainly involve conflict. As a general rule, sociologists always have to examine the connections between consensus and conflict within societies. The values held by different groups and the goals that their members pursue often reflect a mixture of common and opposed interests. For instance, even in Marx's theory of class conflict, capitalists depend on a labour force to work in their businesses, just as workers depend on capitalists to provide wages. Open conflict is not continuous because what both sides have in common overrides their differences. For this reason, Max Weber argued that the future of the working classes lay in wringing concessions from capitalism, not in trying to overthrow it.

A useful concept for analysing the interrelation of conflict and consensus is ideology – ideas, values and beliefs which help secure the position of more powerful groups at the expense of less powerful ones. Power, ideology and conflict are always closely connected. Ideological dominance can often create the appearance of consensus, as the internalization of ideological notions leads people to accept gross inequalities of opportunity, status and condition. Those who hold power may depend mainly on the influence of ideology to retain their dominance but are usually able to use force when necessary. For instance, in feudal times, aristocratic rule was supported by the idea that a minority of people were 'born to govern', but aristocratic rulers often resorted to violence against those who dared to oppose their power.

In recent times, the so-called Arab Spring of 2010–12 saw the apparently stable societies of the Middle East and North Africa riven with protests and demonstrations which expressed pent-up frustrations and underlying conflicts of interest. In Libya, Bahrain and Syria, when appeals to national pride and shared solidarity had failed, the governing regimes turned to military force to try to put down the protests. The example shows that neither consensus nor conflict are 'natural'; both are outcomes of social processes.

Societies and sociology in transformation

For much of its history, sociology was dominated by the so-called Marx–Weber debate on the character and future of capitalist societies. For both Marx and Weber, the emergence of capitalism was a fateful development which shaped the direction of societies around the world. Marx saw capitalism as more dynamic than any preceding type of economic system. Capitalists compete to sell their goods to consumers, and, in order to survive in a competitive market, firms have to produce their wares as cheaply and efficiently as possible. This leads to constant technological innovation as companies strive to gain an edge over their rivals. Capitalist firms also seek out new markets for goods, cheap raw materials and cheaper sources of labour. For Marx, capitalism is a restlessly expanding system spreading to all parts of the globe.

Max Weber is one of Marx's most perceptive critics, and his work has been described as involving a lifelong struggle with 'the ghost of Marx' – the intellectual legacy Marx left behind. Weber agreed that economic factors played a crucial role in social change, but *non-economic* factors, such as ideas and ideologies, also played their part. For example, Weber argued (as did Marx) that material interests are the main driving force in history, but for Weber these interests are channelled in particular directions by ideas, which act rather like the 'switchmen' who direct powerful trains at railway junctions. Weber's understanding of modern societies and their direction of travel contrasts sharply with that of Marx.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

3.1 Marx and Weber – the shaping of the modern world

Broadly Marxist ideas	Broadly Weberian ideas
1 The main dynamic of modern development is the expansion of capitalistic economic mechanisms.	1 The main dynamic of modern development is the rationalization of production.
2 Modern societies are riven with class inequalities, which are basic to their very nature.	2 Class is one type of inequality among many – such as inequalities between men and women – in modern societies.
3 Major divisions of power, such as those affecting the differential position of men and women, derive ultimately from economic inequalities.	3 Power in the economic system is separable from other sources. For instance, male–female inequalities cannot be explained in economic terms.
4 Modern societies (capitalist societies) are a transitional type – we may expect them to become radically reorganized in the future. Socialism will eventually replace capitalism.	4 Rationalization is bound to progress further in the future, in all spheres of social life. All modern societies are dependent on the same basic modes of social and economic organization.
5 The spread of Western influence across the world is mainly a result of the expansionist tendencies of capitalist enterprise.	5 The global impact of the West comes from its command over industrial resources, together with superior military power.

According to Weber, capitalism is just one aspect of social development, and in some ways the impact of science and bureaucracy has been more important. Science has shaped modern technology and would continue to do so in any future socialist society, while bureaucracy remains the most efficient way of organizing large numbers of people effectively. Bureaucracies inevitably expand with modern life, becoming a key source of rationalization – the organization of social and economic life according to principles of efficiency on the basis of technical knowledge (see 'Global society' 3.1 below). Weber also suggests, against Marx, that capitalism actually provides a counterbalancing source of creativity to the stultifying 'dead hand' of bureaucratic domination.

Which interpretation of social change is correct? Perhaps today this is not the most pressing question. The classical theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber and their later incarnations may not be the best guides to contemporary issues of shifting gender relations, multicultural societies, globalization, technological development and accelerating climate change. Do we now need new theories that move beyond the classics, perhaps taking sociology in different directions?

[Global society 3.1](#) Rationalization as McDonaldization?

Anyone who has eaten at a McDonald's restaurant abroad as well as at home will have noticed many similarities. The interior decorations may vary, the language spoken will differ, but the layout, the procedure for ordering, staff uniforms, and 'service with a smile' are essentially similar. Compared with many other restaurants, one of the obvious differences at McDonald's is just how efficient the whole process is. Staff members work on specialized, straightforward jobs: one makes the fries, another flips the burgers, a third puts the burger in a bun and adds the salad. Much of the process is also automated – milkshakes at the press of a button, deep fryers that work at set temperatures, and tills with buttons for each item so staff do not even have to learn food prices.

But why should sociologists be interested in fast food? George Ritzer (1983, 1993, 1998) argues that McDonald's provides a vivid metaphor of recent economic and cultural transformations. What we are witnessing, he says, is the 'McDonaldization' of society: the process by which the basic principles of fast-food restaurants come to dominate other areas of society. Using the four guiding principles of McDonald's restaurants – *efficiency, calculability, uniformity* and *control through automation* – Ritzer argues that modern societies are becoming ever more 'rationalized' and that McDonald's is simply the best exemplar of the process. 'McDonaldization', he notes, is catchier than 'Burger Kingization' or 'Starbuckization'.

Like Weber, Ritzer claims that the long-term process of [rationalization](#) can, paradoxically, generate irrational outcomes. Weber saw that bureaucracies take on a life of their own, spreading through social life with harmful as well as positive consequences. Similarly, Ritzer argues that the apparently rational process of McDonaldization spawns a series of irrationalities – damage to our health, from a 'high calorie, fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar content' diet, and to the environment, with all the packaging that is thrown away after each meal. Most of all, McDonaldization is

'dehumanizing'. People file forward in queues as if on a conveyer belt, while staff repeat the same tasks over and over again, like robots.

Ritzer's thesis has been very influential in sociology, though in recent years McDonald's has been forced to change its practices to compete in the global economy, tailoring its 'product' to fit the local cultures in particular markets around the world – an excellent example of glocalization in practice.

Reflexivity, risk and cosmopolitan theory

The ideas of the classical thinkers – Marx, Durkheim and Weber – were formed during times of great social, political and economic change, which their perspectives sought to understand. Arguably, we are living through a period of global transformation that is just as profound, yet more widely felt across more regions of the world. The need to refresh and update our theoretical perspectives seems increasingly necessary if sociology is to remain relevant. The theory of globalization is discussed extensively in chapter 4, and we will not anticipate that discussion here. Instead, we look at three significant theories which assume that globalization *is* transforming human societies. These are selected as representative of sociologists who reject the postmodern idea of the death of modernity.

Anthony Giddens on social reflexivity

Giddens has developed a theoretical perspective on the transformative changes happening in the present-day world (Giddens 2002, 2011). We live in what he calls a 'runaway world' marked by new risks and uncertainties of the sort outlined by Ulrich Beck (1999). Living in a digital, information age also means an increase in social reflexivity. Social reflexivity refers to the fact that we have constantly to think about, or reflect upon, the circumstances in which we live our lives.

When societies were shaped by custom and tradition, people could follow established ways of doing things in a more unreflective fashion. Today, many aspects of life that for earlier generations were simply

taken for granted become matters of open decision-making. For example, for hundreds of years people had no effective ways of limiting the size of their families. With modern forms of contraception, and other forms of technological involvement in reproduction, parents can not only choose how many children they have but even decide what sex those children will be. These new possibilities, of course, are fraught with new ethical dilemmas.

Yet the idea of a runaway world does not imply that we have *inevitably* lost control of the future. In a global age, nations certainly lose some of the power they used to have. The 2008 financial crash demonstrated that individual governments have less influence over their national economies than once they had. But, as many governments acted collaboratively to formulate strategy and provide funds to assist the worst-hit countries, the crisis also showed that nations can work together to exert some influence.

Voluntary groups and social movements outside the framework of formal politics can also have an important role, but they will not supplant orthodox democratic politics. Democracy is still crucial, because these groups make divergent claims and have different interests – those who actively campaign for more tolerance of abortion and those who believe entirely the opposite, for instance. Democratic governments must assess and react to these varying claims and concerns.

Sociology as a discipline is not unaffected by these social changes, and sociologists are becoming more reflexive about their own research practice and its effects on participants. The divide between academic 'experts' and unknowledgeable 'laypeople' seems far less rigid today. Those who participate in interviews, focus groups, questionnaires, and so on, are increasingly included in other aspects of the research process – advising on appropriate questions, identifying ethical issues, and reading and commenting on draft research reports. This deeper involvement can enhance the validity of research findings, as sociologists can check their interpretations with participants before arriving at firm conclusions. On present trends it is likely that reflexivity will continue to spread to more areas of social life.

Ulrich Beck – risk in the second modernity

The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1944–2015) also rejects postmodernism. Rather than living in a world 'beyond the modern', we are moving into a phase of what he calls 'the second modernity'. Beck's social theory of a 'second modernity' refers to the fact that modern institutions are becoming global, while everyday life is breaking free from the hold of tradition and custom. The old industrial society is disappearing and is being replaced by a '<u>risk society</u>'.

Beck is not arguing that the contemporary world is more risky than that of previous ages. Rather, it is the nature of the risks we must face that is changing. Risk now derives less from natural dangers or hazards than from our own social development and by the development of science and technology. For example, global warming represents possibly the most serious environmental issue today. Yet the scientific consensus is that this is not a simple natural disaster but the product of excessive greenhouse gases from industrial pollution and modern transportation emissions over the past 250 years. Popular science writers have dubbed such problems the 'revenges of nature'.

The advance of science and technology creates new risk situations that are very different from those of previous ages. Science and technology obviously provide us with many benefits. Yet they create risks that are hard to measure. Thus no one quite knows what the risks involved in the development of new technologies, such as gene therapy or nanotechnology, might be. Supporters of genetically modified crops, for example, claim that at best they give us the possibility of ending malnutrition in the world's poorest countries and providing cheap food for everyone. Sceptics claim that they could have dangerous, unintended health consequences.

In March 2011, a magnitude 9.0 earthquake off the coast of Japan caused a tsunami which crashed into the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, resulting in three nuclear meltdowns and the release of radioactive material. While earthquakes and tsunamis have always been a risk on the east coast of Japan, our development of nuclear power plants made this a much more serious disaster and has created much greater risk.

Beck's ideas on risk are discussed in more detail in chapter 5, 'The Environment'.

According to Beck, an important aspect of the risk society is that its hazards are not restricted spatially, temporally or socially. Today's risks affect all countries and all social classes; they have global, not merely personal, consequences. Terrorist attacks have impacted on the extent to which people think of their communities as being at risk from

extreme violence. The fear of terrorism created inertia in economies around the world, particularly in the months after the attacks of September 2001 (9/11), as businesses became reluctant to risk large-scale investment. Terrorist attacks also changed the assessment that states made over the balance between the freedom of its citizens and their security, with many curtailing civil liberties to increase surveillance of potential terrorist threats.

Many decisions taken at the level of everyday life have also become infused with risk. Risk and gender relations are actually closely linked, as many uncertainties have entered the relationships between the sexes (see chapter 15, 'Families and Intimate Relationships'). A generation ago, in the developed societies, marriage was a fairly straightforward process of life transition – people moved from being unmarried to being married, and this was assumed to be a fairly permanent situation. Today, many people live together without getting married, and divorce rates are relatively high. Anyone contemplating a relationship with another person must take these facts into account and must calculate the risk, setting the likelihood of happiness and security against an uncertain backdrop.

Cosmopolitanism

Beck's later work followed that of other sociologists (Vertovec and Cohen 2002; Benhabib 2006) into a theory of cosmopolitanism (Beck 2006; Beck and Grande 2007). Beck's version begins from a critique of 'nation-state-based' thinking – that is, theories which take (national) societies as their main unit of analysis. Beck (2006: 18) argues that this 'national outlook' 'fails to grasp that political, economic and cultural action and their (intended and unintended) consequences know no borders'. In our age of globalization and environmental crisis, where national borders are becoming more permeable and individual states are less powerful, social reality is being transformed in a thoroughly cosmopolitan direction. And the process is occurring behind the backs of sociologists. If allowed to develop without direction, cosmopolitanization presents as many threats as opportunities, particularly for those who are exploited by multinational corporations traversing the globe seeking cheaper labour and maximal profits.

Beck argues that the narrow viewpoint of the nation-state becomes an impediment when it comes to tackling new risks, such as global warming, or dealing effectively with global health pandemics such as the Covid-19 outbreak in late 2019 and 2020. Beck suggests we need a cosmopolitan system based on the acknowledgement and acceptance of cultural diversity. Cosmopolitan states do not fight only against terrorism but also against the *causes* of terrorism in the world. To Beck, cosmopolitanism provides the most positive way to cope with global problems, which may appear insoluble at the level of the individual state but are manageable through cooperation. New forms of activism are also appearing as we see the emergence of a field of 'sub-politics'. This refers to the activities of groups and agencies operating outside the formal mechanisms of democratic politics, such as ecological, consumer or human rights groups.

Beck concedes that thinking in universal or cosmopolitan terms is not really new. Previously, the idea of citizenship beyond the nation-state was the preserve of well-travelled and well-connected social elites who *voluntarily* chose to see themselves as 'Europeans', for example, or as 'citizens of the world'. Roudometof (2018) traces the first usage of the term back 'at least 2,000 years', with the modern concept being widely used in the period of the French Enlightenment to refer to 'a citizen of the world'. Cosmopolitanism today has much stronger roots in global processes and is therefore, at least potentially, more effective. Beck argues that it is not enough for sociologists simply to analyse the emerging cosmopolitan world society; if the problems associated with globalization are to be tackled, they should also be involved in shaping it in positive directions.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Are the theories in this section really departures from the sociological classics? Do you detect any traces of Marxism, functionalism or interactionism within them? Similarly, do any of them fit the characterization of a consensus or conflict theory?

[Conclusion: sociological theory in development](#)

In this chapter we embarked on a whistle-stop tour of the history of sociological theorizing, illustrated with brief discussions of some influential theories, trends and critiques.

And it is the case that sociological theories develop in close contact and competition with each other. However, sociological theory cannot be successful if it develops only through such internal debate. It has to provide us with insights into the key issues of the day and must be empirically adequate as well as internally coherent.

The history of sociological theory shows that successful perspectives are always in a process of development and do not remain static. For example, neo-Marxist theories today remain close enough to Marx's original ideas to be recognizable, but they have been modified, amended and renewed along the way by the force of changing circumstances. A similar process of revisiting and revising has occurred in relation to Durkheimian and Weberian ideas, which today are less formal and systematic than in the past.

At the same time, the diversity of contemporary sociological theories has led to combinations of theories, crossing the divide between the classical and the modern. Indeed, it might be argued that theoretical syntheses offer the greatest hope of preserving the best of the classical traditions while updating them for today's world. As the final section shows, the best contemporary theories are able to help us get to grips with the most important issues of the age.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. 'Any scientific sociology must strive to be positivist.' Why do most sociologists disagree with this statement? Can a non-positivist sociology still be 'scientific'?

2. Marx argued that class conflict would lead to revolution and the end of capitalism. How have later neo-Marxists explained the failure of the working class to fulfil its 'historic role'?

3. What is a social fact according to Emile Durkheim? Provide some examples. How has the concept of social facts been criticized from other sociological perspectives?

4. Outline Max Weber's 'Protestant ethic' thesis, focusing on the role of religion in the origins of capitalism. What, if anything, does this thesis tell us about the character of twenty-first-century capitalism?

5. What is symbolic about 'symbolic interactionism'? List some of the main differences between phenomenology and ethnomethodology.

6. Explain what Elias means by human figurations. Provide some real-world examples of figurations.

7. According to Giddens, what constitutes the 'duality of structure'? Provide some examples which illustrate this idea.

8. How did feminist theorists criticize malestream sociology? In what ways has sociology changed following such criticisms? Why do some people still insist that sociology has not fully integrated the concept of gender into the discipline?

9. Discuss the proposition that the prefix 'post-' in postcolonial, postmodern and poststructuralist theories implies a critique of mainstream perspectives but puts nothing constructive in their place. What evidence is there that the postmodern idea that the age of modernity is over is simply wrong?

10. Following Ulrich Beck, what is a 'manufactured risk'? Provide some examples. What is meant by a risk society? Do we live in risk societies today?

11. Should we abandon the classical sociological theories of Durkheim, Marx and Weber as unsuitable for the twenty-first century? Which aspects of their work, if any, remain relevant today, and what might they still help us to understand?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

The question of whether the classical sociological theories and perspectives have anything to contribute to our understanding of the global problems of the twenty-first century remains pertinent. Marx could not have predicted the emergence and impact of AI and robotics on the workforce, Weber did not foresee global warming, and Durkheim's work is not the best example of postcolonial theory.

In the late twentieth and early twenty-first century a range of theorists, some discussed in this chapter, have tried to develop new perspectives and frameworks that may give us a better grasp of such emerging issues. The article below introduces a special issue of the journal, reflecting on the challenges facing sociology today. Read it (and perhaps others in this issue) and answer the questions below.

> Possamai-Inesedy, A., Rowe, D., and Stevenson, D. (2017) 'Sociology in the 21st Century: Challenges Old and New', *Journal of Sociology*, 53(4): 723–9; https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783317747443.

1. Make a list of the 'issues and challenges' in this piece, both socially and in terms of the discipline of sociology. Which of these are genuinely 'new'?

2. What concepts and/or theories do the authors draw on to address the postcolonial critique of sociology?

3. The authors suggest that they have not 'turned their backs' on 'the old, proven skills' necessary for doing sociology. Explain what these skills are and why they are thought still to be relevant.

4. What evidence is there in this paper that some of the older theories, concepts and ideas are still in play, even as the authors argue for creative new developments?

5. 'Sociology remains firmly anchored in its founding preoccupations.' How do the authors square this conclusion with their overall focus on the need for novel approaches?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

The postcolonial critique of mainstream sociology is a powerful one which raises some fundamental problems with the idea of 'business as usual' for today's sociologists. One key issue is the problematizing of the central concept of 'modernity', which has long been the focus of sociological theories, from Marx to Giddens, Beck, Bauman and many more. Is the concept of modernity doomed to the 'dustbin of history' or is there a way to modify and save it? Does it deserve to be saved?

In recent decades, one way to hang onto the concept has been to note the widely differing and divergent paths of modernization taken by countries around the world. These have led to a series of ideas on 'multiple modernities'. The article below summarizes these various attempts and tries to explain why they have not had as much impact as might have been expected. Read the paper, then write a 750-word defence of the concept of modernity, taking account of the postcolonial critique from earlier in this chapter. In particular, discuss what sociology would lose should this concept be abandoned, and whether moving towards multiple modernities can reinvigorate the theory of modernization in a globalizing world.

> Fourie, E. (2012) 'A Future for the Theory of Multiple Modernities: Insights from the New Modernization Theory', *Social Science Information*, 51(1): 52–69.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Margaret Atwood's 1985 novel *The Handmaid's Tale* is often described as a work of speculative fiction, portraying events in the USA – renamed Gilead – following environmental catastrophe and civil war. American society is subjected to the rule of a strict theocratic dictatorship rooted in a very specific and fundamentalist reading of the Bible. In Gilead, gender roles are clearly defined and brutally established, with new social categories created that shape the lives of all individuals. The book was the source for a television series which, as of 2019, was in its third season (and moved beyond the novel). Read the book and/or watch at least one season of the series.

Many people have interpreted this work as a feminist novel on account of the stark power imbalance between men and women and the ways in which women at the bottom of the hierarchy still find novel ways of resisting the system. However, there are other sociological themes in the story. In particular, as you read/watch, take notes on the central theoretical issues introduced earlier of consensus versus conflict and structure versus agency.

1. Following Marx's ideas on class conflict, what would you say is the central organizing conflict in Gilead society? In what ways is this conflictual society held together and presented as consensual? Is there any theoretically deduced contradiction within Gilead that might eventually lead to a social revolution from within?

2. Write a 1,000-word essay applying either Giddens's structuration theory, Elias's ideas on figurations, or Durkheim's concept of social institutions and social facts to Atwood's Gilead. Take account of the extensive militarization of this society, which social categories offer the best prospects for individual agency, and whether these are entirely male-dominated.

Further reading

There are many books covering sociological and social theory, so you could try dipping into a few titles to find one that suits. A comprehensive text aiming to use social theory in real-world applications is Michelle Dillon's (2019) *Introduction to Sociological Theory: Theorists, Concepts and their Applicability to the Twenty-First Century* (3rd edn, Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell). Pip Jones and Liz Bradbury's (2018) *Introducing Social Theory* (3rd edn, Cambridge: Polity) is also very good.

For the classical theories, Kenneth Morrison's (2006) *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought* (London: Sage) is reliable, while George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky's (2017) *Classical Sociological Theory* (7th edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage) is an excellent book. For contemporary theory, Anthony Elliott's (2014) *Contemporary Social Theory: An Introduction* (2nd edn, London: Routledge) is well written and comprehensive.

Remember that at some point it will be necessary to read the key theorists in their original works, most of which are not as daunting as you might think. Ultimately this is a necessary requirement if you are to make your own interpretation and assessment of their relative merits.

For a collection of original readings on sociological theories, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Sociologists: Dead and Very Much Alive – excellent resources on a range of sociological theorists:
www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/jhamlin/4111/Sociologists.html

The Feminist Theory Website – feminist theories and perspectives from academics based at Virginia Tech University:
www.cddc.vt.edu/feminism/enin.html

Phenomenology Online – phenomenologists and ethnomethodologists:
www.phenomenologyonline.com/

A series of websites devoted to the work of some contemporary theorists:
Jean Baudrillard: https://baudrillardstudies.com/
Zygmunt Bauman: https://baumaninstitute.leeds.ac.uk/
Judith Butler: https://bigthink.com/u/judithbutler
Ulrich Beck: https://webarchiv-ulrich-beck.soziologie.uni-muenchen.de/en/
Norbert Elias: http://norbert-elias.com/en/
Michel Foucault: https://michel-foucault.com/
Anthony Giddens: www.thoughtco.com/anthony-giddens-3026484
Erving Goffman: http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/goffmanbio.html

CHAPTER 4

GLOBALIZATION AND SOCIAL CHANGE

CONTENTS

This image of Europe and North Africa at night, taken from space, is one illustration of the global extent of human settlement.

Human beings have existed on Earth for less than half a million years. If we think of this entire span of human existence as a 24-hour day, agriculture came into existence at 11.56 p.m. – four minutes to midnight – and civilizations at 11.57 p.m. The development of industrial societies began only at 11.59 and 30 seconds, and yet, in those last 30 seconds of the human day, there has been more rapid population growth and socio-environmental change than in all the ages leading to it.

As we will see throughout this chapter, the period sociologists call modernity brought large-scale societies into closer contact with each other in a variety of ways, from systematic trade and long-range economic exchange, international political agreements and global tourism to electronic communications and large-scale migration. In all

these ways, people have become more interconnected, interdependent and geographically mobile than ever before (Sheller and Urry 2004; Urry 2007).

Migration and the research agenda on 'mobilities' in sociology is discussed in [chapter 8](#), 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

The sheer pace of change in the modern era is evident in rates of human population growth. Livi Bacci (2012) studies the global population and its long-term growth. From an estimated 6 *million* people in 10,000 BCE, the global population rose to more than 6 *billion* by 2000 and reached 7.7 billion by 2019. However, the pace of population growth has been uneven, accelerating from around 1750, the start of the industrial period. The most striking demographic aspect here is the shrinking 'doubling time' of the global population. In 1750, it took 1,000 years for the population to double in size. By 1950 this was down to 118 years, and in 2000 it was a mere forty years. Livi Bacci (2017: 26) calculates that, at this rate, the world's population will reach 11 billion by the end of the century, which, the UN (UN DESA 2019c: 5–6) estimates, may be the peak human population, as the pace of growth has begun to slow.

If 11 billion people seems unsustainable, remember that, in the nineteenth century, the idea that 7 billion people could survive on Earth was quite literally unthinkable, and yet it has already been reached and surpassed. Whether such unprecedented levels can be sustained depends not simply on the carrying capacity of the natural environment but also on economic and technological developments, social organization and political decisions.

, 'The Environment', looks more closely at the environmental impact of rapid human expansion.

In the rest of this chapter we look at the spread of key aspects of modernity before examining the various meanings attached to the concept of globalization. As a basic working definition, we can say that globalization is characterized both by a set of processes that bind the societies and people of the world into tighter interdependence and by a growing global consciousness that influences how people act. The speed at which the Covid-19 virus spread around the world in 2019–20 demonstrates the very high levels of geographical mobility of people and goods in our globalizing age. Many social scientists see the contemporary phase as *the* most significant development that will shape humanity's future.

, 'Global Inequality', looks in more detail at some of the key evidence and theories from the discipline of demography.

Later in the chapter we will explore debates on whether globalization is highly significant or somewhat exaggerated and what its consequences might be. Before that we will set the current globalization debate into a much longer time frame, and there follows a sketch of human development over the very long term. This is necessary in order to understand better how the development of modern industrial-capitalist societies set the human world on its present global trajectory.

Globalization is one of our four central themes. A guide listing where to find the main sections and discussions can be found in the book's Introduction.

Early societies and civilizations

Today we are accustomed to societies of tens of millions of people living in densely populated cities and urban areas. But this is historically unusual. For most of human history, the populations were smaller and less dense, and it is only quite recently that societies have existed in which the *majority* of the population consists of urban dwellers. To understand the forms of society that existed before modern industrialism, we have to draw on the historical dimension of our sociological imagination.

Human origins and migration

Currently, the evidence from ancient tools, fossils and molecular genetics suggests that *Homo sapiens* originated in Africa between 200,000 and 300,000 years ago. Cowen (2001: 20–4) argues that, around 100,000 years ago, small forager groups began to move in search of subsistence, first migrating across Africa before spreading to the Middle East and India and, later, to New Guinea, Australia, America and into Europe. Around 10,000 years ago, hunting was still dominant on all continents despite some settled communities; however, by 5,000 years ago, many more human groups were growing crops and forming settled societies and the first city societies had been established.

Global society 4.1 Humans and the domestication of fire

Over the course of human history, human beings gradually learned how to exert more control over the natural environment and were able to pass on this useful knowledge to geographically distant groups and to their own younger generations. In *Fire and Civilization* (1992), the Dutch sociologist Johan Goudsblom (1932–2020) argues that an especially significant development was the discovery of fire and the invention of techniques for making, managing and keeping it under control.

Human groups that learned how to make and use fire gained dominance over those that did not. Eventually all human societies were able to make and use fire, which enabled them to dominate other animal species. Goudsblom's developmental history of fire shows something of the way that societies try to manipulate and manage the natural environment to their own advantage. In the process, though, there is also pressure on societies to change their own social organization.

From small domestic fires used for keeping warm and cooking food, all the way to modern central heating systems and large power plants, the gradual expansion of fire-making has necessitated more complex forms of social organization. When early humans learned how to make and manage small fires, they had to organize themselves to keep fires going, to monitor them and, at the same time, to stay safe. Much later, with the introduction of domesticated fires into private homes, societies needed specialists in fire control – fire brigades and fire-prevention advisers. With the advent of large power-generating stations, it has become important to protect these, militarily if necessary, from potential attack. Today, more people are more dependent on the easy availability and control of fire than ever before.

Goudsblom notes one further consequence of the domestication of fire: the changing psychology of individuals. To be able to use fire,

people had to overcome their previous fear of it, perhaps born of seeing naturally occurring bush fires, lightning strikes or volcanoes. This was not an easy task. It meant controlling their fears and emotions long enough to be able to take advantage of the possible benefits of fire use. Such emotional control slowly came to be experienced as 'natural', so that people today hardly think about how long it has taken for humans to arrive at such high levels of control over their emotions.

Even today, fires still cause harm, destroying forests, homes, families and businesses. Fire is always threatening to escape the control of human societies, however firmly established that control might seem. The sociological lesson we can take from this study is that the relationship between human societies and the natural environment is an unavoidable two-way process: human societies try to exert control over the natural environment, but, as they do so, the natural environment also imposes certain constraints and requirements on them.

European explorers, traders and missionaries from the early fifteenth century reported back on the variety of human societies, cultures and ways of life. They recorded small-scale, nomadic, hunter-gatherer groups of just twenty or thirty people who survived by eating wild animals and plants. In parts of South and North America and East Asia were larger, quite settled communities based on agriculture and farming. In China and elsewhere they also found empires with cities, class groups, palaces and armed forces (Harris 1978).

This variety of major human groups and societies can be roughly organized into three main categories: *hunters and gatherers*, larger *agrarian* and *pastoral societies* (involving agriculture or the tending of domesticated animals) and *traditional states and civilizations*. As table 4.1 shows, successive societal types tended to increase the size of the global human population.

Around 20,000 BCE – the peak of the last Ice Age – some hunting and gathering societies began to raise domesticated animals and cultivate fixed plots of land as their means of livelihood, and by 5000 BCE many groups and societies across the world lived by farming (Mithen 2003).

[Pastoral societies](#) are those that rely mainly on domesticated livestock, while [agrarian societies](#) are those that grow crops (practise agriculture), though many societies have had mixed pastoral and agrarian economies.

Depending on their environment, pastoralists rear and herd animals such as cattle, sheep, goats, camels and horses. Many pastoral societies still exist, concentrated especially in parts of Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia. These societies are usually found in regions with dense grasslands, deserts or mountains that are not amenable to agriculture but may support livestock. Pastoral communities usually migrate across different areas according to seasonal changes. Given their nomadic lifestyle, people in pastoral societies do not normally accumulate many material possessions, although their way of life is more complex in material terms than that of hunters and gatherers.

Table 4.1 Types of pre-modern human society

Type	Period of existence	Characteristics
Hunting and gathering societies	50,000 BCE to the present. Today on the verge of disappearance.	Small numbers gaining a livelihood from hunting, fishing and gathering edible plants. Few inequalities. Differences of rank limited by age and gender.
Agrarian societies	12,000 BCE to the present. Most are now part of larger political entities, thus losing their distinct identity.	Based on small rural communities without towns or cities. Livelihood through agriculture, often supplemented by hunting and gathering. Stronger inequalities than hunters and gatherers. Ruled by chiefs.
Pastoral societies	12,000 BCE to the present. Today mostly part of larger states; traditional ways of life are being undermined.	Size ranges from a few hundred people to many thousands. Dependent on tending domesticated animals for subsistence. Marked by distinct inequalities. Ruled by chiefs or warrior kings.

Type	Period of existence	Characteristics
Traditional societies or civilizations	6000 BCE to the nineteenth century. All traditional civilizations have now disappeared.	Very large in size, some numbering several millions of people. Some cities exist, in which trade and manufacture are concentrated. Based largely on agriculture. Major inequalities exist among different classes. Distinct government apparatus headed by a king or emperor.

Several hundred people of the Hadza tribe continue to live as hunter-gatherers, the last of their kind in East Africa. Survival International estimates that the Hadza have lost about half of their land over the last sixty years.

At some point, some hunting and gathering groups began to sow their own crops. This practice first developed as 'horticulture', where small areas were cultivated using hoes and digging tools. Like pastoralism, horticulture provided a more secure food supply than was possible by hunting and gathering and could therefore support larger communities. Since they were more settled, people could then develop larger stocks of material possessions than either hunting and gathering or pastoral communities. As table 4.2 shows, only a small minority of people in the industrialized countries today still work on the land, though agriculture remains a significant or primary source of employment for numerous developing countries, most of them in Africa. Since originating in Africa, the long-term direction of human life was towards settled agriculture and, as a result, a rising global population.

World population: 10 million
Percentage of hunters and gatherers: 100

10,000 BCE

World population: 350 million
Percentage of hunters and gatherers: 1.0

1500 CE

World population: 6 billion
Percentage of hunters and gatherers: 0.001

2000 CE
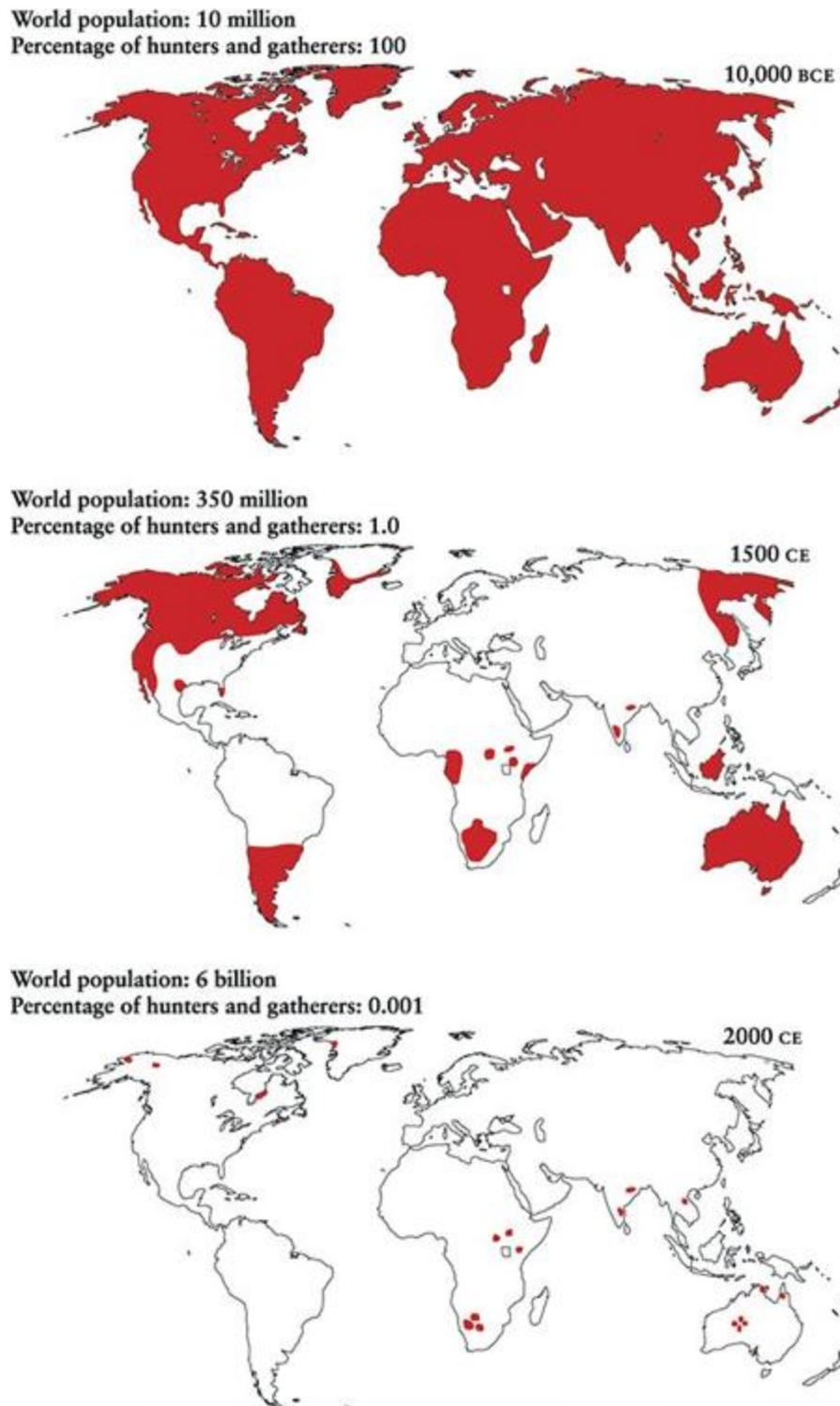
Figure 4.1 The decline of hunting and gathering societies

Source: Lee and De Vore (1968: ii).

Table 4.2 Agricultural employment (percentage of workforce), selected countries, 2019

Note: Figures based on the most recent national estimates available.

Source: Adapted from CIA World Factbook online (2019).

Country	Percentage of workers in agriculture
Burundi	92
Chad	81
Central African Republic	72
Malawi	72
Mozambique	71
	The impact of industrialization
Australia	3
Japan	3
Netherlands	2
United States	1
Germany	1

Traditional civilizations

Archaeologists have found evidence of much larger societies than existed previously, from around 6000 BCE (see figure 4.2). These societies were based on the development of cities and had pronounced inequalities of wealth and power associated with the rule of kings or emperors. Because they used writing, science and art flourished, and they are usually described as *civilizations*.

The earliest large civilizations developed in the Middle East, usually in fertile river areas. The Chinese Empire originated around 2000 BCE, when powerful states were also founded in what are now India and Pakistan, and a number of large civilizations existed in Mexico and Latin America, such as the Aztecs of Mexico, the Mayas of the Yucatan peninsula and the Incas of Peru. Most traditional civilizations were also

empires – that is, they expanded through the conquest and incorporation of other peoples (Kautsky 1982). This was true, for instance, of traditional China and Rome. At its peak, in the first century CE, the Roman Empire stretched from Britain in North-West Europe to beyond the Middle East. The Chinese Empire, which lasted more than 2,000 years, up to the threshold of the twentieth century, covered most of the region of eastern Asia now occupied by China.

The emergence of large-scale civilizations and empires shows that the very long-term process of human expansion has long involved invasion, war and violent conquest every bit as much as cooperation and mutual exchange (Mennell 1996). By the dawn of the industrial era in 1750, humans had already settled in all parts of the globe, though the world population was still relatively small, at 771 million (Livi Bacci 2012: 25). But this was about to change in a radical way.

The transformation of societies

What happened to transform types of society that had existed for the majority of human history? A large part of the answer is industrialization – which refers to the emergence of machine production, based on the widespread use of inanimate power resources such as steam and electricity to replace humans and animals wherever possible. The industrial societies (often called 'modern' or 'developed' societies) are very different from all previous types of social order, and their spread has had genuinely revolutionary consequences.
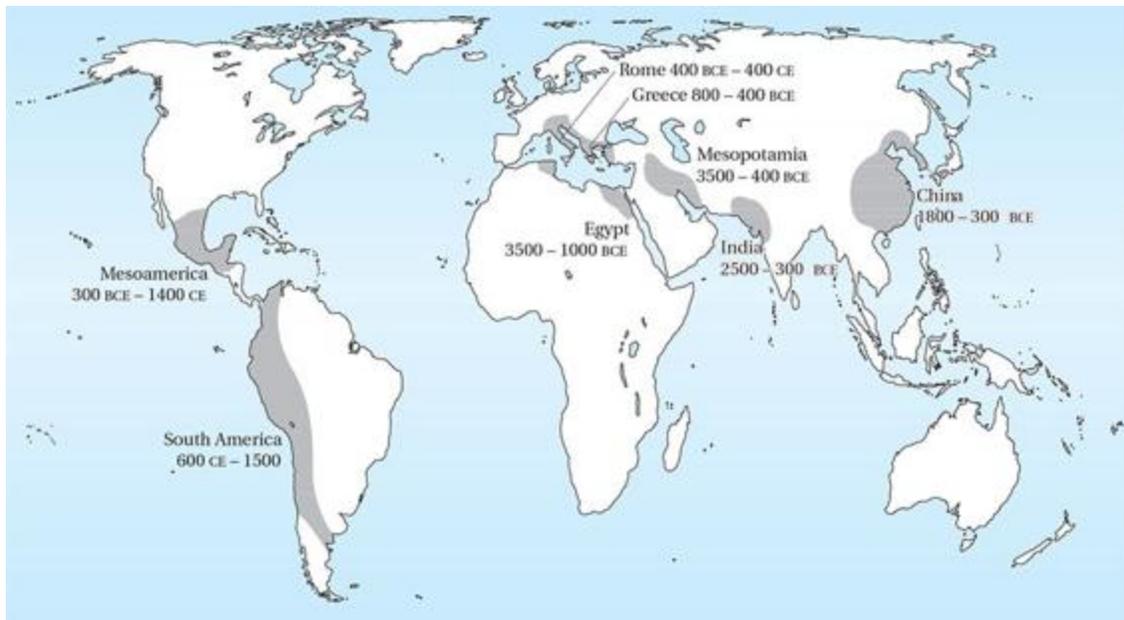
Figure 4.2 Civilizations in the ancient world

Modernity and industrial technology

In even the most advanced of traditional civilizations, the relatively low level of technological development permitted only a small minority to escape agricultural work. Modern technology has transformed the way of life enjoyed by a very large proportion of the human population. As the economic historian David Landes (2003: 5) observes:

Modern technology produces not only more, faster; it turns out objects that could not have been produced under any circumstances by the craft methods of yesterday. The best Indian hand-spinner could not turn out yarn so fine and regular as that of the [spinning] mule; all the forges in eighteenth-century Christendom could not have produced steel sheets so large, smooth and homogeneous as those of a modern strip mill. Most important, modern technology has created things that could scarcely have been conceived in the pre-industrial era: the camera, the motor car, the airplane, the whole array of electronic devices from the radio to the high-speed computer, the nuclear power plant, and so on almost ad infinitum.

Even so, the continuing existence of gross global inequalities means that this technological development is not shared equally across the world's societies.

The modes of life and social institutions characteristic of the modern world are radically different from those of even the recent past, and over a period of less than three centuries – a sliver of time in human history – people have shifted away from ways of life that endured for many thousands of years. For example, a large majority of the employed population now work in services, factories, offices and shops rather than agriculture, while the largest cities are denser and larger than any urban settlements found in traditional civilizations.

The role of cities in the new global order is discussed in chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life'.

In traditional civilizations, political authorities (monarchs and emperors) had little direct influence on the customs and habits of most of their subjects, who lived in fairly self-contained local villages. With industrialization, transportation and communication became much more rapid, making for a more integrated 'national' community. The

industrial societies were the first nation-states to come into existence. Nation-states are political communities, divided from each other by clearly delimited borders rather than the vague frontier areas that separated traditional states. States have extensive powers over many aspects of citizens' lives, framing laws that apply to all those within their borders. Virtually all societies in the world today are nation-states of this kind.

Nation-states are discussed more extensively in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', and chapter 21, 'Nations, War and Terrorism'.

Industrial technology has by no means been limited to peaceful economic development. From the earliest phases, production has been put to military use, radically altering how societies wage war, creating weaponry and military organizations far more advanced than in earlier cultures. Together, economic strength, political cohesion and military superiority account for the spread of 'Western' ways of life across the world over the last 250 years. Once again we have to acknowledge that globalization is not simply about trade but is a process that has often been characterized by wars, violence, conquest and inequality (see chapter 21, 'Nations, War and Terrorism').

THINKING CRITICALLY

Which three aspects of modern, industrialized countries that make them radically different from earlier societies would you pick out as the most significant?

Classifying the world's societies

Classifying countries and regions into groups according to criteria of similarity and difference is always contentious, as all such schemes are likely, or may be perceived, to contain value judgements. For example, after the Second World War, and with the developing Cold War between the superpowers of the Soviet Union and the USA, the three worlds model was widely used in academic studies. In this model, the *First World* included the industrialized countries such as the USA, Germany and the UK; the communist countries of the Soviet Union (USSR) and Eastern Europe made up the *Second World*; and the non-industrial countries with relatively low average incomes made up the *Third World* (see chapter 6, 'Global Inequality', for a discussion of the political origins of concept of the Third World).

Although presented as a neutral classification, it is hard to use these terms without appearing to imply that the First World is somehow superior to the Second and the Second is superior to the Third. In short, this scheme was adopted by scholars from the First World, who viewed their own societies as the norm towards which all others would or should strive. The collapse of Eastern European communism after 1989 and rapid industrialization in some Third World countries made this model less empirically adequate, and few, if any, social scientists use this scheme uncritically today.

An alternative scheme that is still widely used today is the simple, perhaps overly simple, distinction between developed and developing countries. Countries that have undergone a thorough process of industrialization and have high levels of gross domestic product (GDP) per capita, including Australia, Norway and France, fall within the category of developed countries. On the other hand, developing countries have mostly been exploited and underdeveloped by colonial regimes and consequently are less industrialized, have lower levels of GDP per capita, and are undergoing a long-term process of economic improvement. Niger, Chad, Burundi and Mali fall into this category, for example (UNDP 2019b: 300–3). This basic classification has long been used by the UN and those working in the sub-field of 'development studies', though it does not claim to be based on widely agreed criteria. Instead it is designed to enable the collection of statistical information which allows for international comparisons, which in turn facilitates

interventions aimed at improving the life chances of people in developing countries.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

4.1 Newly industrializing countries

Some countries within the broad category of developing countries have embarked successfully on a rapid process of industrialization, which suggests that a country's position within the development ranking can be changed. These countries have been described as newly industrializing countries (NICs), or newly industrializing economies (NIEs), and today they include Brazil, India, Malaysia, Mexico, the Philippines, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey and Indonesia (World Population Review 2020). These follow on from the earlier examples of four so-called Asian tigers (or dragons) of Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan, which achieved annual rates of economic growth several times those of the Western industrial economies between the 1960s and the late 1990s (Sarel 1996).

The East Asian NICs have shown sustained levels of economic prosperity and are investing abroad as well as promoting growth at home. South Korea's shipbuilding and electronics industries are among the world's leaders, Singapore is becoming the major financial and commercial centre of South-East Asia, and Taiwan is an important presence in the manufacturing and electronics industries. Some economists argue that the reclassification of some previously poorer countries, and especially the rapid development of Brazil, Russia, India and China (the 'BRIC' countries), may even signal an emergent shift in the pattern of global power in favour of the developing world (O'Neill 2013). However, it is probably too early to draw this conclusion with much confidence.

Nonetheless, NICs have achieved something truly remarkable, transforming their economies over just three or four decades and moving from the status of low-income or developing to high-income, developed countries. And, even though the 2008 financial crisis and recession did lead to economic contraction, the early NICs

weathered the recession and recovered more quickly than most longer-established developed economies. Singapore and Taiwan, for example, saw remarkable rises in GDP in 2010 of 14.5 per cent and 10 per cent, respectively (CIA 2012). What the NICs demonstrate is that sustained economic and social development is possible, though we should not expect all developing countries to follow the same path. The very different starting points and situations of developing countries mean that the NIC experience is unlikely to be repeated across developing countries in Africa.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Take one NIC from the list above and do your own research to find out when the country's economy began to take off, which industries drove forward this development, how the national government promoted development, and how globalization facilitated rapid development.

Further discussion of the NICs can be found in [chapter 6](), 'Global Inequality'.

Since 2010, the UN has combined national life expectancy at birth, years of schooling and gross national income per capita (GNI) into its Human Development Index (HDI) as the basis for assessing the general condition of countries around the world. The HDI divides countries into four development categories: very high, high, medium and low human development. Hence, the basic concept of 'development' remains central to this scheme. Again, although this may appear as a neutral method of classifying countries based on empirical data, not everyone agrees.

It may be argued that there is still an inherent bias, as the developing countries are seen to be 'developing' towards the existing model presented by the industrialized, developed countries, thus privileging the latter's form of 'development' over all possible alternatives. There is also no sense from this scheme that the lower average incomes, life expectancy levels and public spending on schooling in many developing countries is part of the continuing legacy of being actively underdeveloped while under colonial rule. The World Bank abandoned the developed/developing scheme in 2016, preferring a classification of countries based on income per capita – low income, lower-middle income, upper-middle income and high income – which allows for reclassification as national economies improve or decline. However, this move means that the revised scheme is based purely on economic criteria and does not take account of other indicators, such as those embedded within the HDI. At present, the basic developed/developing country contrast is still widely used in development studies work and among many NGOs and aid agencies.

Another alternative is to contrast the majority world with the minority world. This scheme reverses the perceived status of the developed and developing countries, reminding us that the majority of the world's population actually lives in 'developing' countries and only a minority lives in the 'developed' world (Dodds 2018). It also makes clear in a very stark and simple way that, even in a supposedly postcolonial age, a minority continues to own and control the majority of global wealth to the disadvantage of most of the world's population. In this way the distinction aims to institute a normative bias in favour of developing countries. So far, the majority/minority world contrast has not taken root, and the most recent, and still developing, way of discussing global inequalities and power relations is to contrast the Global South with the

Global North. This approach is more overtly postcolonial in its aims than previous schemes.

From the seventeenth to the early twentieth century, Western countries used their overwhelming military power and technology to establish colonies in regions previously occupied by traditional societies. In some regions, such as North America, Australia and New Zealand, which were thinly populated by hunting and gathering groups, European colonists became the majority population. In other areas, including much of Asia, Africa and South America, local populations remained in the majority and lived under minority rule. Many countries in the Global South today are in areas of Asia, Africa and South America that faced colonial domination and rule.

The policy and practice of [colonialism](#) shaped the map of the world until the former colonies were able to break free and become independent countries in their own right. A few colonized regions gained independence quite early. Haiti, for instance, became the first autonomous black republic in 1804. The Spanish colonies in South America gained their freedom in 1810, while Brazil broke away from Portuguese rule in 1822. However, most colonized countries became independent states only after 1945, often following bloody anti-colonial struggles against Western colonists. In India, and a range of other Asian countries including Burma, Malaysia and Singapore, as well as those in Africa such as Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania and Algeria, nationalist movements and popular uprisings were crucial in challenging the economic and military power of Western colonial regimes.

Generally, these countries are very different to those that existed before colonialism. Their political systems tend to be modelled on those first established in the West – that is to say, they are nation-states – and, while most of the population still lives in rural areas, many are experiencing a rapid process of urbanization. Similarly, agriculture remains the main economic activity in many countries, but crops are produced for sale in world markets rather than purely for local consumption. What is clear is that 'developing countries' are not 'primitive' societies that have simply 'lagged behind' the industrialized countries. Western colonialism systematically 'underdeveloped' these countries in order to plunder their resources, which, in turn, helped to

generate rapid economic development in the West. Colonial regimes undermined the existing economic and social systems, leaving former colonies severely disadvantaged on independence.

> The legacy of colonialism and the postcolonialist critique of sociology are discussed in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Seen globally, the majority world of developing countries lies in the southern hemisphere, and you may see them collectively described as the Global South, contrasted with the minority world of developed countries in the Global North. Geographically, this is a rough and ready generalization because, for example, Australia, New Zealand and Chile are in the Global 'South' but are high or middle-high income, developed countries that are typical of the Global 'North' (World Bank 2020a). Also, as countries in the Global South continue to develop economically, this simple geographic division of the world becomes less accurate.

Yet the shift in terminology used here was never intended to be purely a descriptive alternative. Rather, it marks a political intervention in debates on global interdependence, particularly the notion that intensifying the connections between countries through globalization will benefit them all. Dados and Connell (2012: 13) argue that the term 'Global South' 'references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained.' Indeed, Mahler (2018: 32) argues that some regions within the Global North are also disadvantaged and exploited, while wealth and power continue to flow to a minority. Simply put, 'there are Souths in the geographic North and Norths in the geographic South.'

Framing global relations in this way looks to build solidarity among all of those that are negatively impacted by global capitalism, regardless of geographical location, and it is clear that this is not an attempt to

produce a 'neutral' classification. The model is based not on classifying the world's countries but on relations of inequality, power and domination, both between and within national societies. In this sense, it is a very different way of looking at and thinking about global issues that is not directly comparable to the other classification schemes discussed above.

It is clear that all classification schemes have pros and cons, so how do we choose? One way of moving forward that may become more common in the future is to avoid committing to any of these broad, generalizing schemes that slice up, arrange and rearrange the diverse type of societies in the world. Instead, we might just try to be clearer about what we mean in the context of what we are discussing at the time. Toshkov (2018) forcibly makes this case, arguing that, 'If you mean the 20 poorest countries in the world, say the 20 poorest countries in the world, not countries of the Global South. If you mean technologically underdeveloped countries, say that and not countries of the Third World. If you mean rich, former colonial powers from Western Europe, say that and not the Global North. It takes a few more words, but it is more accurate and less misleading.'

Sociology is a discipline that tries to draw the broadest, legitimate, general conclusions that are consistent with the available evidence, and this generalizing approach is important and necessary. Yet Toshkov's argument is persuasive and may be more widely adopted in the future. We will go some way in this direction in the rest of the chapter (and elsewhere), though, in practice, we will often use developed/developing countries where our source material adopts this framing. Where they are appropriate, we will also use majority/minority worlds, high-/medium-/low-income countries, colonialism and postcolonialism, and a geographical version of the rough Global South/Global North distinction.
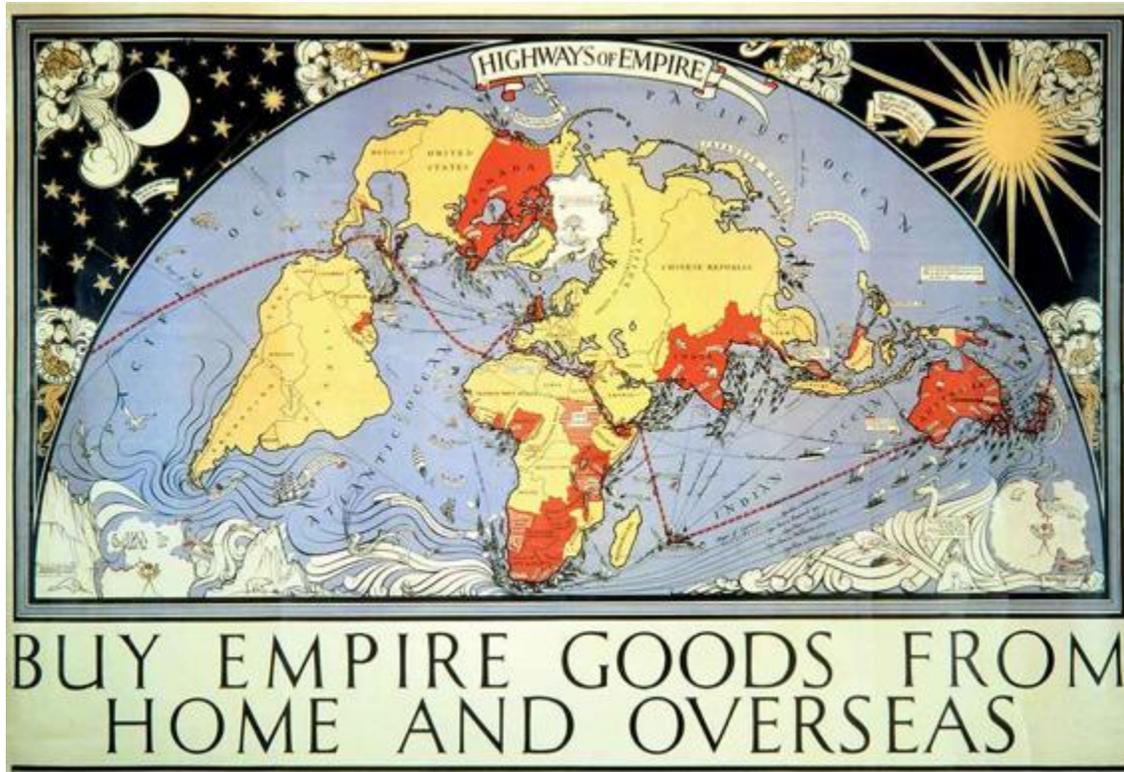
By the early twentieth century, Britain's colonial expansion had created 'an empire on which the sun never sets' covering over one-fifth of the global population. This advertisement presents the empire, coloured red, along with trading routes.

How societies change

Sociology's founders all saw the modern world as, in crucial ways, a radically different place than it had been in the recent past. Yet social change is difficult to define because, in a sense, society is changing or 'in process' all of the time. Sociologists try to decide when there has been fundamental social change leading to a new form or structure of society and then look for explanations of what brought such change about. Identifying major shifts means showing that there has been an alteration in the *underlying structure* of an institution or society over a specified period of time. All accounts of social change must also show what remains stable, as a baseline against which to measure change. Auguste Comte described this kind of analysis as the study of social *dynamics* (processes of change) and social *statics* (stable institutional patterns).

In the rapidly moving world of today there are still continuities with the distant past. For example, major religions such as Christianity and Islam retain their ties with ideas and practices initiated in ancient times. Yet most institutions in modern societies change more rapidly than those of earlier civilizations, and we can identify the main elements that consistently influence patterns of social change as *economic* development, *socio-cultural* change and *political* organization. These can be analysed separately, though in many cases a change in one element brings about change in the others.

Economic development

Many human societies and groups thrive and generate wealth even in the most inhospitable regions of the world. On the other hand, some survive quite well without exploiting the natural resources at their disposal. For example, Alaskans have been able to develop oil and mineral resources to produce economic development, while hunting and gathering cultures have frequently lived in fertile regions without ever becoming pastoralists or farmers.

Physical environments may enable or constrain the kind of economic development that is possible. The indigenous people of Australia have never stopped being hunters and gatherers, since the continent

contained hardly any indigenous plants suitable for regular cultivation or animals that could be domesticated for pastoral production. Similarly, the world's early civilizations originated in areas with rich agricultural land such as river deltas. The ease of communication across land and the availability of sea routes are also important: societies cut offfrom others by mountain ranges, impassable jungles or deserts often remain relatively unchanged over long periods of time.

However, the physical environment is not just a constraint but also forms the basis for economic activity and development, as raw materials are turned into useful or saleable things. The primary economic influence during the period of modernity has been the emergence of capitalist economic relations. Capitalism differs in a fundamental way from previous production systems, because it involves the *constant* expansion of production and the accumulation of wealth without limits. In traditional systems, levels of production were fairly stable, as they were geared to habitual, customary needs. But capitalism promotes the constant revision of production technology, a process into which science is increasingly drawn. The rate of technological innovation in modern industry is vastly greater than in any previous type of economy, and raw materials have been used in production processes in quantities undreamed of in earlier times.

Consider information and communications technology (ICT). Over recent decades, the power of computers has increased many thousand times over. A large computer in the 1960s was constructed with thousands of hand-made connectors, but an equivalent device today is much smaller (often hand-held) and needs just a few silicon chips in an integrated circuit. The impact of science and technology on how we live may be driven largely by economic factors, but it also stretches beyond the economic sphere. Science and technology both influence and are influenced by cultural and political factors. Scientific and technological development helped create modern forms of communication such as radio, television and the internet, and these electronic forms have changed the way politics is conducted and partly shape how we all think and feel about the world.

Socio-cultural change

Socio-cultural change includes, as a minimum, the impact of religion and beliefs, communications and leadership on social life. Religion may be a conservative or an innovative force, emphasizing the continuity of traditional values and behaviour or actively promoting change. As Max Weber showed, religious convictions have played a significant mobilizing role in the pressure to transform societies. Weber's 'Protestant ethic thesis' is the best-known example, but in recent times the Catholic Church, seen by many as essentially conservative, played a key role in supporting the Solidarity movement in Poland, which overthrew the communist regime. Similarly, many activists who took part in the 'Arab Spring' of 2010–12 saw their actions as part of an attempt to reclaim Islam for their countries from corrupt political leaders and authoritarian regimes.

Communication systems have played an important and enduring role in changing the underlying character of societies. The invention of writing, for instance, allowed recordkeeping and made possible an increasing control of material resources and the development of large-scale organizations. Writing altered people's perception of the relationship between past, present and future. Societies that keep written records know themselves to have a history, and understanding that history can create a sense of the overall development of a society. With the advent of the internet, communication has become much faster and distance is no longer a significant obstacle. In addition, it has generated a more effective perception of a global society – often called a [cosmopolitan](#) outlook – made concrete in global crowdfunding charity campaigns and recent global movements against capitalism and, paradoxically, free-market globalization.

Leadership is a further socio-cultural element of change, which Weber explored through the concept of charisma. Individual charismatic leaders have played important roles in world history. Religious leaders such as Jesus or Muhammad, political and military leaders such as Julius Caesar, or innovators in science and philosophy such as Isaac Newton have all influenced how societies change. An individual leader capable of pursuing dynamic policies, generating a popular following or radically altering existing modes of thought can help overturn an established order.
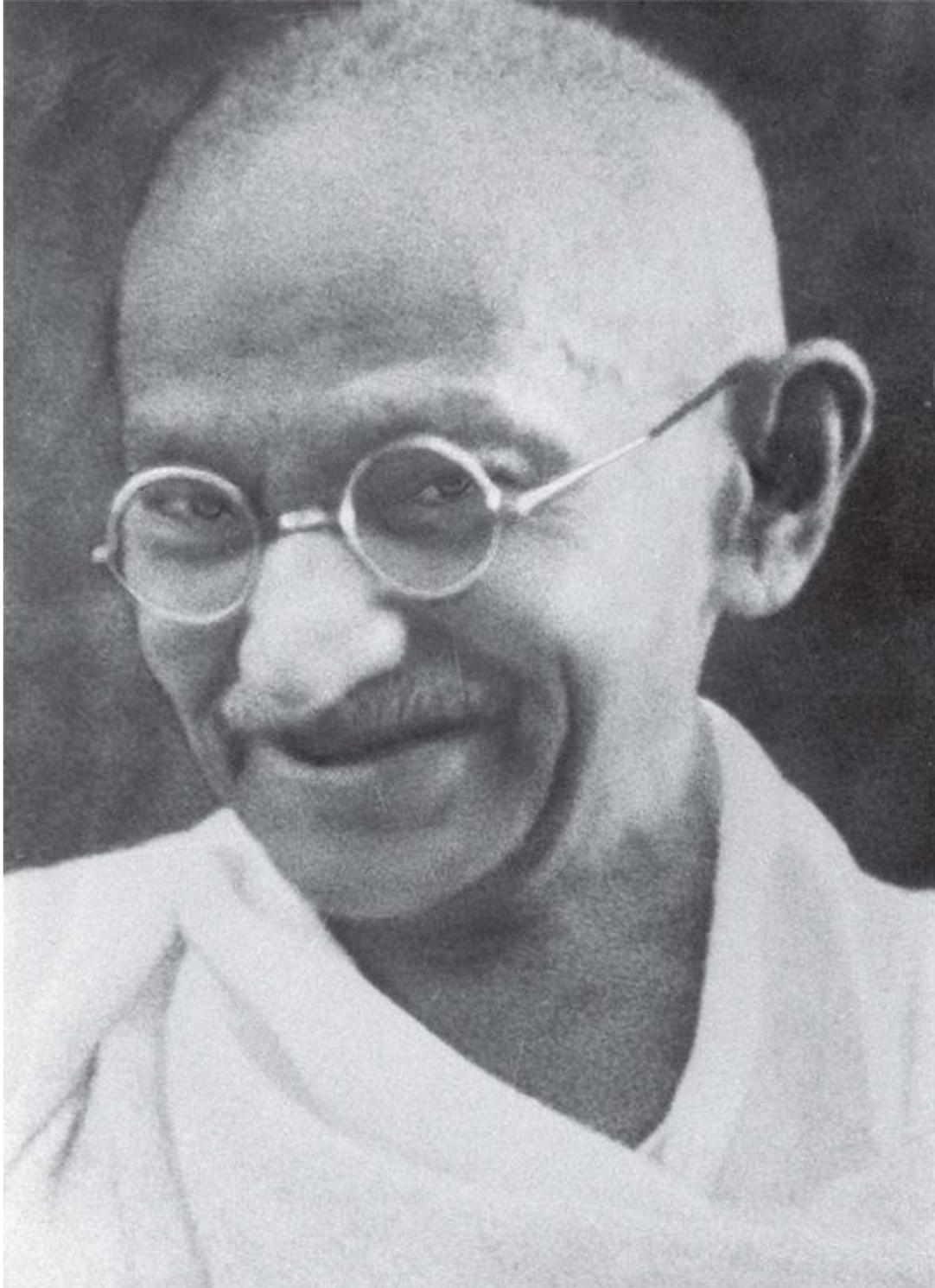
Mahatma Gandhi fits Weber's concept of a charismatic leader. His leadership of the national independence movement helped to free India from British colonial rule.

However, individuals can reach positions of leadership and become effective only if favourable social conditions exist. Adolf Hitler rose to power in Germany in the 1930s, for instance, partly as a result of the tensions and crises that beset the country at that time, which made his apparently simple solutions much more attractive. In a very different way, Mahatma Gandhi, the famous pacifist leader in India during the period leading to independence in 1947, was an effective figurehead because the 1939–45 war and other events had unsettled the British colonial institutions in India, creating a political opportunity for change.

In modern times, the development of science and the secularization of social life have been influential agents of change, contributing to the critical and innovative character of the modern outlook. People no longer accept customs or habits just because they have the age-old authority of tradition and are more likely to be persuaded by rational, scientific argument. In addition to *how* we think, the *content* of ideas has changed. Ideals of self-betterment, individual freedom, equality and democratic participation are part of modern life. These ideals may have developed in a particular form in the West, but they have become genuinely universal in their application, promoting social and political change in most regions of the world.

Political organization

A third element in fundamental social change is political organization. In most types of society, the existence of distinct political agencies such as chiefs, lords, kings and governments is highly significant in shaping society's course of development. Political systems are not, as Marx argued, merely the direct expression of underlying economic

organization; different types of political order may exist in societies with very similar economic systems. For instance, some industrial capitalist societies have had authoritarian political systems (Nazi Germany and South Africa under [apartheid](#)), while others are based on democratic participation (the USA, Britain or Sweden).

The political and military struggle between nations has driven social change in modern times. Political change in traditional civilizations was confined to small groups of elites, such as members of aristocratic families who replaced each other as rulers, but, for the majority, life went on virtually unchanged. This is not true of modern political systems, in which the activities of political leaders and government officials constantly affect the lives of the population. Both externally and internally, political decision-making promotes and directs social change far more effectively. Governments play a major role in stimulating, and sometimes retarding, economic growth, and in all industrial societies there is a high level of state intervention in the economy. Even in apparently 'free-market' economies, trade unions help to regulate market forces and governments set the legislative framework within which companies operate.

Marx studied political economy in the nineteenth century. Although its meaning has changed since then, political economy generally refers to the study of all the ways in which political institutions and economic systems influence one another. It is often important, for the purposes of analysis, to separate the economic, the political and the socio-cultural aspects of social change, but we should remember that phenomena in the social world are complex amalgams of these different spheres. Nowhere is this more significant than when trying to grasp the multifaceted process of globalization, which is transforming social life and challenging the longstanding autonomy of individual nation-states.

Globalization

The concept of globalization is common currency in academic research, political debate, business strategy and the mass media. Yet, when the concept is invoked, it often refers to different things. For some, globalization is something like a political and economic project, pursued by elite groups in the Global North and aimed at promoting global trade to their own advantage. This is a version that provokes much anger and resistance. On the political right, globalization threatens and ultimately undermines precious national identities. On the left, globalization is often seen as a capitalist-led movement that plunders and exploits new regions, deepening inequalities and destroying good jobs in its wake (Crouch 2019a).

For many sociologists, globalization refers to a set of largely unplanned processes, involving multidirectional flows of things, people and information across the planet (Ritzer 2009). However, although this definition highlights the increasing fluidity or liquidity of the contemporary world, many scholars also see globalization as the simple fact that individuals, companies, groups and nations are becoming ever more *interdependent* as part of a single global community. As we saw in the introduction to this chapter, the process of growing global interdependence has been occurring over a very long period of human history and is certainly not restricted to recent decades (Nederveen Pieterse 2004; Hopper 2007). Therborn (2011: 2) makes this point well:

> Segments of humanity have been in global, or at least transcontinental, transoceanic, contact for a long time. There were trading links between ancient Rome and India about 2,000 years ago, and between India and China. The foray of Alexander of Macedonia into Central Asia 2,300 years ago is evident from the Greeklooking Buddha statues in the British Museum. What is new is the mass of contact, and the contact of masses, mass travel and mass selfcommunication.

As Therborn suggests, contemporary sociological debates are focused much more on the sheer pace and intensity of contemporary globalization. It is this central idea of an intensification of the process that marks this period out as different, and this is the main focus of our discussion below. The process of globalization is often portrayed as primarily an economic phenomenon, and much is made of the role of transnational corporations, whose operations stretch across national borders, influencing global production processes and the international division of labour. Others point to the electronic integration of global financial markets and the enormous volume of global capital flows, along with the unprecedented scope of world trade, involving a much broader range of goods and services than ever before. As we will see, contemporary globalization is better viewed as the coming together of political, social, cultural and economic factors.

Elements of globalization

The process of globalization is closely linked to the development of information and communication technology, which has intensified the speed and scope of interactions between people around the world. Think of the 2018 football World Cup, held in Russia. Because of satellite technology, global television links, submarine communication cables, fast broadband connections and widening computer access, games could potentially be seen *live* by billions of people across the world. This simple example shows how globalization is embedded within the everyday routines of more people in more regions of the world, creating genuinely global shared experiences – one important prerequisite for the development of a global society.

Information technology

The explosion in global communications has been facilitated by a number of important technological advances. Since the Second World War, there has been a profound transformation in the scope and intensity of telecommunication flows. Traditional telephonic communication, which depended on analogue signals sent through wires and cables with the help of mechanical crossbar switching, has been replaced by integrated systems in which vast amounts of

information are compressed and digitally transferred. Cable technology has become more efficient and less expensive, and the development of fibre-optic cables has dramatically expanded the number of channels that can be carried.

The earliest transatlantic cables, laid in the 1950s, were capable of carrying fewer than 100 telephone channels, but by 1992 a single transoceanic cable could carry some 80,000 channels. In 2001, a transatlantic submarine fibre-optic cable was laid that is capable of carrying the equivalent of a staggering 9.7 million telephone channels (Atlantic Cable 2010). Today, such cables carry not just telephony but internet traffic, video and many other types of data. The spread of communications satellites orbiting the planet, beginning in the 1960s, has also been significant in expanding international communications. Today, a network of more than 200 satellites is in orbit facilitating the transfer of information around the globe, though the bulk of communication continues to be via submarine cables, which are still more reliable.

[Classic studies 4.1](#) Immanuel Wallerstein on the modern world-system

The research problem

Many students come to sociology looking for answers to big questions. Why are some countries rich and others desperately poor? How have some previously poor countries managed to become relatively wealthy, while others have not? Such questions of global inequality and economic development underpin the work of the American historical sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019). In addressing these issues, Wallerstein sought to take forward Marxist theories of social change for a global age. In 1976 he helped to found the Fernand Braudel Center for the Study of Economies, Historical Systems and Civilizations at Binghamton University, New York, which became a focus for his own world-system research.

Wallerstein's explanation

Before the 1970s, social scientists tended to discuss the world's societies in terms of First, Second and Third worlds, based on their levels of capitalist enterprise, industrialization and urbanization. The solution to Third World 'underdevelopment' was therefore thought to be more capitalism, more industry and more urbanization. Wallerstein rejected this dominant way of categorizing societies, arguing instead that there is one world economy and that all the societies within it are connected by capitalist economic relationships. He described this complex intertwining of economies as the 'modern world-system', which was a pioneer of today's globalization theories. His main arguments about how the world-system emerged were outlined in a three-volume work, *The Modern World-System* (1974, 1980, 1989), which set out his macrosociological perspective.

The origins of the modern world-system lie in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, where colonialism enabled countries such as Britain, Holland and France to exploit the resources of the

countries they colonized. This allowed them to accumulate capital, which was ploughed back into their economy, driving forward production and development. This global division of labour created a group of rich countries but impoverished many others, thus stunting their development. Wallerstein argues that the process produced a world-system made up of a *core*, a *periphery* and a *semi-periphery* (see figure 4.3). And although it is clearly possible for individual countries to move 'up' into the core or to drop 'down' into the semi-periphery and periphery, the basic structure of the modern world-system remains constant.

Wallerstein's theory tries to explain why developing countries have found it so difficult to improve their position, but it also extends Marx's class-based conflict theory to a global level. In global terms, the world's periphery becomes 'the working class', while the core forms the exploitative 'capitalist class'. In Marxist theory, this means that any future socialist revolution is now likely to occur in the developing countries rather than in the wealthy core, as originally forecast by Marx. This is one reason why Wallerstein's ideas have been well received by political activists in the anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements.

Core – The most developed, industrialized and affluent nations.

Semi-periphery – Intermediate in terms of affluence, with a degree of autonomy and economic diversity.

Periphery – The most powerless, with narrow economic base in agriculture or minerals. Source of cheap labour for core multi-national corporations.
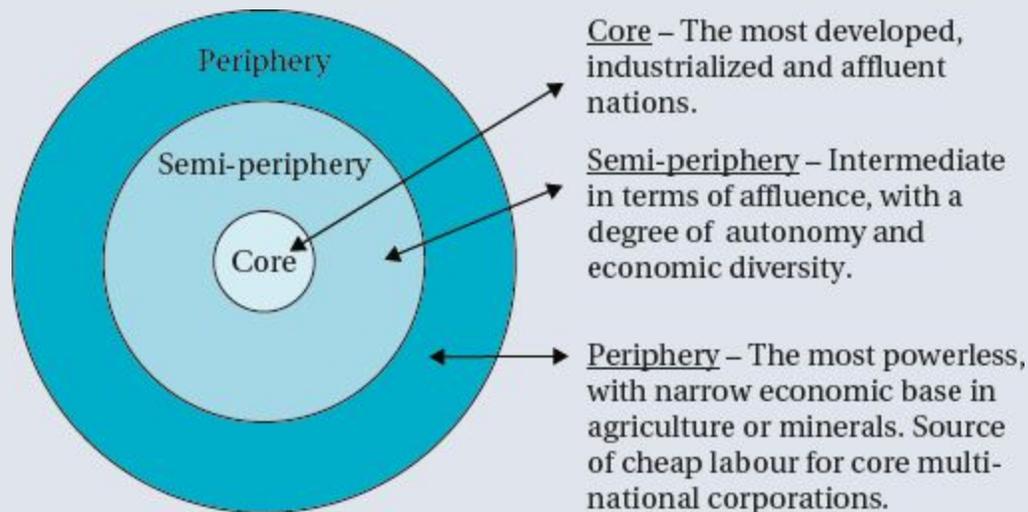
Figure 4.3 The modern world-system

Critical points

With its origins in the work of Marx and Marxism, world-systems theory has faced some similar criticisms. First, the theory tends to emphasize the economic dimension of social life and underplays the role of culture in explanations of social change (Barfield 2000). It may be argued, for example, that one reason why Australia and New Zealand were able to move out of the periphery more easily than others was because of their close *cultural* ties to British industrialization, which allowed an industrial culture to take root more quickly.

Second, the theory underplays the role of ethnicity, which is seen merely as a defensive reaction against the globalizing forces of the world-system. Therefore, major differences of religion and language are not considered to be particularly significant. Finally, Wallerstein's thesis is seen as overly state-centred, concentrating on the nation-state as a central unit of analysis. But this makes it more difficult to theorize the process of globalization, which involves transnational corporations and interests that operate across nation-state boundaries (Robinson 2011). Of course, Wallerstein and his supporters have sought to counter these arguments over recent years.

Contemporary significance

Wallerstein's work has been important in alerting sociologists to the interconnected character of the capitalist world economy and its globalizing effects. He therefore has to be given credit for early recognition of the significance of globalization processes, even though his emphasis on economic activity is widely seen as limiting.

Wallerstein's approach has attracted many scholars, and, with an institutional base in the Fernand Braudel Center and an academic journal devoted to its extension – the *Journal of World-Systems Research* (since 1995) – world-systems analysis is now an established research tradition.

In countries with highly developed telecommunications infrastructures, homes and offices have multiple links to the outside world, including landline and mobile phones, digital, satellite and cable television, electronic mail and the internet. The internet has emerged as the fastest-growing communications tool ever developed. In mid-1998, around 140 million people worldwide were using it. By the end of 2000 this had risen to over 360 million, and, by mid-2019, over 4.5 billion people across the world were internet users, almost 60 per cent of the global human population (table 4.3).

Most superfast broadband is delivered not by satellite but via the much older method of transoceanic cables, laid on or under the seabed. The 6,600 kilometre Marea cable, laid between Spain and Virginia in the US, was a joint venture by Facebook and Microsoft and the first linking the US and southern Europe.

Table 4.3 **The global spread of internet usage, 2019: mid-year estimates**

Source: Adapted from www.internetworldstats.com/stats.htm.

World regions	Population (2019 estimates)	Internet users 30 June 2019	Penetration (% population)	Growth (%) 2000–2019
Africa	1,320,038,716	522,800,480	39.6	11,481
Asia	4,241,972,790	2,300,469,859	54.2	1,913
Europe	829,173,007	727,559,682	87.7	592
Middle East	258,356,867	175,502,589	67.9	5,243
North America	366,496,802	327,568,628	89.4	203
Latin America/Caribbean	658,346,826	453,703,292	68.9	2,411
Oceania/Australia	41,839,201	28,636,278	68.4	276
World total	7,716,223,209	4,536,248,808	58.8	1,157

These technologies facilitate what Harvey (1989) calls time–space compression. For instance, two individuals located on opposite sides of the planet – say, Tokyo and London – can not only hold a conversation in real time but also send documents, audio, images, video, and much more. Hence, the relative distance between places is dramatically reduced and the world as experienced is effectively shrinking, allowing people to become conscious of a single global human society.

Widespread use of the internet and smartphones is deepening and accelerating processes of globalization as more people are interconnected, including those in places that were previously isolated or poorly served by traditional communications. Rapid telecommunications infrastructure is not evenly distributed, but a growing number of countries can access global communication networks, and, as table 4.3 shows, the fastest growth in internet access over the twenty-first century is in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, as these regions begin to catch up.

Information flows

The spread of information technology has both expanded the possibilities for cultural contact between people around the globe and facilitated the flow of information about people and events. Every day, news and information are brought into people's homes, linking them directly and continuously to the outside world. Some of the most gripping (and disturbing) events of recent times – the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, pro-democracy protests and the crackdown in China's Tiananmen Square (also in 1989), terrorist attacks on America in 2001 and the occupation of Egypt's Tahrir Square in 2011 as the 'Arab Spring' developed – have unfolded before a truly global audience. The interactive character of digital technologies has led to 'citizen journalists' helping to produce the news by reporting 'direct from the scene' of world events over the internet.

The shift to a global outlook has two significant dimensions. First, people increasingly perceive that their responsibility does not stop at national borders. Disasters and injustices facing people around the world are no longer misfortunes that cannot be tackled but legitimate grounds for action and intervention. A growing assumption has arisen

that 'the international community' has an obligation to act in crisis situations to protect the human rights of individuals. In the case of natural disasters, interventions take the form of humanitarian relief and technical assistance. There have also been stronger calls in recent years for intervention and peacekeeping forces in civil wars and ethnic conflicts, though such mobilizations are politically problematic compared to those for natural disasters.

Second, a global outlook seems to be threatening or undermining many people's sense of national (or nation-state) identity. Local cultural identities are experiencing powerful revivals at a time when the traditional hold of the nation-state is undergoing profound transformation. In Europe, people in Scotland and the Catalonia region of Spain may be more likely to identify as Scottish or Catalan – or simply as Europeans – rather than as British or Spanish. A referendum on Scottish independence from the UK in September 2014 was lost, but 45 per cent of the population voted 'Yes'. An unofficial vote in Catalonia in October 2017 saw 92 per cent voting for independence from Spain. In some regions, nation-state identification may be waning as globalization loosens people's orientation to the states in which they live.

The interweaving of cultures and economies

For some socialist and Marxist sociologists, although culture and politics play a part in globalizing trends, these are underpinned by capitalist economic globalization and the continuing pursuit of profits. Martell (2017: 4), for example, argues that 'it is difficult to see many areas of globalization where lying behind them are not also underlying economic structures that affect the equality or power relations with which globalization is produced or received, or economic incentives to do with making money.' This viewpoint accepts the multidimensional character of globalization but rejects the notion that cultural, political and economic factors should be given equal weight. Analysing 'material interests' and the way these are pursued remains the key to understanding globalization in this neo-Marxist perspective.

Of course, others disagree. Those adopting a broadly culturalist position argue that globalization does depend on the continuing integration of the world economy, but that this is achieved in various cultural, not purely economic ways. Tourism is a huge 'industry' around the world, and in 2017 some 1.34 billion international tourists spent US$4.44 trillion in countries other than their own (World Bank 2017). The desire to travel and experience new sights and cultures is not a purely material interest but is influenced by the shifting cultural tastes of tourists, what Urry and Larsen (2011) call the 'tourist gaze'. This thesis is outlined in 'Global society' 4.2.

Waters (2001) argues that the realm of culture is crucial to globalization because it is through cultural and symbolic forms that economic and political developments are freed from the material constraints of geography. For instance, the so-called *weightless economy* is one in which products have their base in information, such as computer software, and media and entertainment products, such as games, films, music and online streaming services. This new economic context is often characterized as the 'knowledge society' or 'the information age'. The emergence of a knowledge society is linked to the development of a broad base of technologically literate consumers who integrate advances in computing, entertainment and telecommunications into their everyday lives. Perhaps the best example is online gamers, who await the latest games and updates with eager anticipation and, of course, are prepared to pay for them.

This 'electronic economy' underpins the broader economic globalization. Banks, corporations, fund managers and individual investors are able to shift funds internationally with just a click. The ability to move electronic money instantaneously carries with it greater risks. Transfers of vast amounts of capital can destabilize economies, triggering international financial crises, and, as the global economy becomes ever more tightly integrated, a financial collapse or disaster in one part of the world can have an enormous effect on distant economies. The 2008 global financial crash is perhaps the best example of this, as the crisis quickly spread outwards from the USA into the rest of the global economic system.

The operation of the global economy reflects changes that have occurred in the information age. In order to be competitive, businesses and corporations have restructured to become more flexible and networked rather than hierarchical, as in older bureaucratic organizations (Castells 1996b). Production practices and organizational patterns have become more flexible, partnering arrangements with other firms are more commonplace, and participation in worldwide distribution networks is essential in rapidly moving global markets.

[Global society 4.2](#) International tourist interactions

Have you ever had a face-to-face conversation with someone from another country or connected to an overseas website? Have you ever travelled to another continent on business or for a holiday? If you answered 'yes', then you have experienced one of the consequences of globalization. Globalization has changed both the frequency and the character of interactions between people of different nations. The historical sociologist Charles Tilly defines globalization in terms of these changes. According to Tilly (1995: 1–2), 'globalization means an increase in the geographic range of locally consequential social interactions.' In other words, a greater proportion of our interactions come to involve, directly or indirectly, people from other countries.

Globalization has greatly expanded the possibilities for international travel, both by encouraging an interest in other countries and by facilitating the movement of tourists across borders. High levels of international tourism translate into an increase in the number of face-to-face interactions between people of different countries. John Urry (2002; Urry and Larsen 2011) argues that the 'tourist gaze' – the expectations on the part of tourists of what they will experience while travelling abroad – shapes many of these interactions.

Urry compares the tourist gaze to Foucault's conception of the medical gaze (see [chapter 10](#), 'Health, Illness and Disability'). He argues that the tourist gaze is just as socially organized by professional experts, just as systematic in its application and just as detached as the medical gaze, but this time in its search for 'exotic' experiences. These are experiences that violate everyday expectations about how social interaction and interaction with the physical environment are supposed to proceed.

Yet, apart from those seeking out extreme experiences, most tourists do not want their experiences to be *too* exotic. A popular

destination for young travellers in Paris, for example, is a McDonald's restaurant. Some go to see if there is any truth to the line from Quentin Tarantino's movie *Pulp Fiction* that, because the French use the metric system, McDonald's 'quarter pounder with cheese' hamburgers are called 'Royales with cheese' (it is true). Britons travelling abroad often cannot resist eating and drinking in comfortable British- and Irish-style pubs. It is these contradictory demands for the exotic and the familiar that are at the heart of the tourist gaze.

The tourist gaze may put strains on face-to-face interactions between tourists and locals. Locals who are part of the tourist industry may appreciate the economic benefits, but others may resent tourists for their demanding attitudes and the overdevelopment that occurs in popular destinations. As with most aspects of globalization, the overall impact of these intercultural encounters has both positive and negative consequences.

McDonald's has fast-food restaurants around the world, including here in Marrakech, Morocco, which adjust the menu and setting according to local cultures.

Transnational corporations

Among the many economic factors driving globalization, the role of [transnational corporations](#) is especially important, despite their relatively small number. Transnational corporations (TNCs) are companies that produce goods or market services across several countries. These may be relatively small firms, with one or two factories outside their home country, or gigantic international ventures whose operations criss-cross the globe. Some of the biggest transnational corporations are companies known all around the world, such as Walmart, Apple, Amazon, ExxonMobil, Nestlé and Alphabet (the parent company of Google). Even when transnational corporations have a national base, they remain oriented towards global markets and profit-making.

Transnational corporations became increasingly significant after 1945. Expansion in the initial post-war years came from firms based in the United States, but by the 1970s European and Japanese firms increasingly invested abroad. In the late 1980s and the 1990s, TNCs expanded dramatically with the establishment of three powerful regional markets: Europe (the Single European Market), Asia-Pacific (the Osaka Declaration guaranteed free and open trade by 2010) and

North America (the North American Free Trade Agreement). Since the early 1990s, countries in other areas of the world have also liberalized restrictions on foreign investment, and by the turn of the twenty-first century there were few economies in the world beyond the reach of TNCs. In very recent years they have expanded their operations into developing countries and Eastern Europe, with China providing the next major challenge and opportunity.

Transnational corporations lie at the heart of economic globalization, accounting for between two-thirds and three-quarters of all world trade (Kordos and Vojtovic 2016: 152). They are instrumental in the diffusion of new technologies around the globe and are major actors in financial markets (Held et al. 1999). Some 500 transnational corporations had annual sales of more than $10 billion in 2001, while only seventy-five *countries* could boast gross domestic products of at least that amount. In other words, the world's leading transnational corporations are, in some respects, larger than many of the world's countries (see figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4 Top 25 US companies by sales compared with GDP of selected countries (in $US billion)

Source: *Foreign Policy* (2012).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

4.2 'Barbie' and the development of global commodity chains

One illustration of global commodity chains is the manufacture of the Barbie doll, the most profitable toy in history. The sixty-year-old teenage doll once sold at a rate of two per second, bringing the Mattel Corporation, based in Los Angeles, USA, over $1 billion in annual revenues (Tempest 1996). Although in its early years the doll sold mainly in the USA, Europe and Japan, today Barbie can be found in more than 150 countries around the world (Dockterman 2016). To avoid relatively high labour costs, Barbie has never been manufactured in the United States (Lord 2020). The first doll was made in Japan in 1959 when wages there were lower than the US, but later manufacture moved to other low-wage countries in Asia. The manufacture of Barbie illustrates a great deal about global commodity chains.

Barbie is designed in Mattel's California headquarters, where marketing and advertising strategies are also devised and most of the profits are made, but the physical product has always sourced its various elements from all over the world.

Tempest (1996) reported that, in the late 1990s, Barbie's body was made from oil produced in Saudi Arabia and refined there into ethylene, which Taiwan's Formosa Plastic Corporation converted into PVC pellets. The pellets were then shipped to one of the four Asian factories – two in southern China, one in Indonesia and one in Malaysia. The plastic mould injection machines that shape the body were made in the USA and shipped out to the factories. Barbie's nylon hair came from Japan and her cotton dresses were made in China with Chinese cotton (the only raw material to come from the country where most of the dolls were made). Nearly all the material used in the manufacture was then shipped into Hong Kong and on to factories in China by truck. The finished dolls left by the same

route, with 23,000 trucks making the daily trip between Hong Kong and southern China's toy factories. More recently, Noah (2012: 100) argues that 'The same pattern persists today, but the volume and technological sophistication of today's "Made in China" products are much greater.'

As for Barbie, sales fell by 6 per cent in 2013, but by 2019 were rising again, up 12 per cent in the fourth quarter of the year (Whitten 2019). This follows diversification of the traditionally slim, blonde-haired, white original version. Barbie is now available in a range of skin tones and body shapes ('petite', 'tall' and a 'curvy body' that reflects the influence of global celebrities such as Beyoncé and Kim Kardashian) and in a variety of employmentbased outfits, including a space suit (Kumar 2019). With a live-action movie in the next stage, who would bet against Barbie appearing in the tenth edition of this book?

JAPAN (hair)

CHINA,
INDONESIA,
MALAYSIA
(body moulding)

USA (manufacture
plastic moulding
machinery)

TAIWAN (plastic
production)

CHINA (cotton for
clothing, and clothing
manufacturer)

SAUDI ARABIA (oil)

HONG KONG
(import of
raw materials)

Barbie literally embodies global commodity chains.

What Barbie production and consumption shows us is the effectiveness of globalization in connecting the world's economies.

However, it also demonstrates the unevenness of globalization, which enables some countries to benefit at the expense of others. We cannot assume that global commodity chains will inevitably promote rapid economic development across the chain of societies involved.

The argument that manufacturing industry is increasingly globalized is often expressed in terms of global commodity chains – worldwide networks of labour and production processes yielding a finished product. Such networks consist of production activities that form a tightly interlocked 'chain' from raw materials to the final consumer (Appelbaum and Christerson 1997). China, for instance, has moved from the position of a low- to a middle-income country because of its role as an exporter of manufactured goods. By 2018, China and India provided the largest shares of total commodity chain employment, at 43.4 per cent and 15.8 per cent respectively, with the USA being the main export destination (Suwandi et al. 2019). Yet the most profitable activities in the commodity chain – engineering, design and advertising – remain mainly in high-income countries, while the least profitable aspects, such as factory production, occur in low-income ones, thus reproducing rather than challenging global inequality.

Political globalization

Globalization is not simply the product of technological developments and the growth of transnational capitalist networks; it is also linked to political change. One key shift was the collapse of communism in a series of dramatic revolutions in Eastern Europe from 1989, culminating in the dissolution of the Soviet Union itself in 1991. This

marked the effective end of the so-called Cold War. Since then, countries in the former Soviet bloc – including Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, the Baltic states, the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia, and elsewhere – have moved towards Western-style political and economic systems. The collapse of communism was hastened by, but also furthered, the process of globalization, as the centrally planned economies and communist parties' ideological and cultural control were ultimately unable to survive in the emerging era of global media and a more electronically integrated world economy.

A second political development has been the growth of international and regional mechanisms of government, bringing nation-states together and pushing international relations in the direction of new forms of global governance. For example, McGrew (2020: 22) notes that 'Today there are over 260 permanent intergovernmental organizations constituting a system of global governance, with the United Nations at its institutional core.' The United Nations and the European Union are perhaps the most prominent examples of nation-states being brought together in common political forums. The UN achieves this through the association of individual nation-states, while the EU has pioneered forms of transnational governance in which a degree of national sovereignty is relinquished by states in order to gain the benefits of membership. Governments of EU states are bound by directives, regulations and court judgements from common EU bodies, but they also reap the economic, social and political benefits from participation in the EU single market.

International governmental organizations (IGOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) are also important forms of an increasingly global politics. IGOs are bodies established by participating governments and given responsibility for regulating or overseeing a particular domain of activity that is transnational in scope. The International Telegraph Union, founded in 1865, was the first, but since then a large number of similar bodies have been created, regulating issues from civil aviation to broadcasting and the disposal of hazardous waste. They include the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

INGOs differ from IGOs in that they are not affiliated with government institutions. They are independent and work alongside governmental bodies in making policy decisions and addressing international issues. Some of the best known – such as Greenpeace, Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders), the Red Cross/Red Crescent and Amnesty International – are involved in environmental protection, healthcare and the monitoring of human rights. But the activities of thousands of lesser-known groups also link countries and local communities together.

What has emerged from the increasing range of transnational political bodies is essentially a form of political globalization, where the central issues are not related purely to national self-interest but take in international and global issues and problems. Modelski and Devezas (2007) see this as essentially the evolution of a global politics, the shape of which has yet to be determined.

Structuring the globalization debate

Accounts of globalization in sociology have been seen as three broad tendencies or 'waves' which ran throughout the 1990s and into the early twenty-first century. And, though there has been much work on specific aspects of globalization since then, the structure of the debate continues to flow across these basic positions. There is an additional approach to globalization, which Martell (2017: 14) calls a 'fourth wave', based on forms of discourse analysis that study existing narratives of globalization and the way they frame, discuss and shape globalization itself (Cameron and Palan 2004; Fairclough 2006). However, while the majority of studies agree that important material changes are taking place internationally, they disagree on whether it is accurate or valid to bundle these together under the umbrella of globalization. Because of this, and for reasons of space, in this section we concentrate on the first three waves.

An influential discussion of the three main positions in the debate is that of David Held and colleagues (1999). This presents three schools of thought – hyperglobalizers, sceptics and transformationalists – which are summarized in table 4.4. The authors cited for each school are

selected because their work contains some of the key arguments that define that school's approach. We will take each wave in turn.

Hyperglobalizers

First-wave hyperglobalizers view globalization as a very real, ongoing process with wide-ranging consequences that is producing a new global order, swept along by powerful flows of cross-border trade and production. Ohmae (1990, 1995) sees globalization leading to a 'borderless world' in which market forces are more powerful than national governments. A large part of this argument rests on the idea that nation-states are losing the power to control their own destiny. Rodrik (2011) argues that individual countries no longer oversee their economies because of the vast growth in world trade, while governments are increasingly unable to exercise authority over volatile world financial markets, investment decisions, increasing migration, environmental dangers or terrorist networks. Citizens also recognize that politicians have limited ability to address these problems and, as a result, lose faith in existing systems of national governance.

The hyperglobalization argument suggests that national governments are caught in a pincer movement, being challenged from above (by regional and international institutions, such as the European Union and the World Trade Organization) and from below (by international protest movements, global terrorism and a lot of talk about something that is quite longstanding, while many of the changes described are not 'global' at all (Hirst et al., 2009). For example, current levels of [economic interdependence](#) are not unprecedented. Nineteenth-century statistics on world trade and investment lead some to argue that contemporary globalization differs from the past only in the intensity of interactions between nation-states. If so, then it is more accurate to talk of 'internationalization' rather than globalization, and this also preserves the idea that nation-states have been and are likely to continue as the central political actors. For instance, Thompson (in Hirst et al., 2009) argues that, during the 2008 'global' financial crisis, it was actually national governments and citizens' initiatives). Taken together, these shifts signal the dawning of an age in which a global consciousness develops and the influence of national governments

declines (Albrow 1997). One consequence is that sociologists will have to be weaned off the concept of 'society', which has conventionally meant the bounded nation-state. Urry (2000) has argued that sociology needs to develop a 'post-societal' agenda rooted in the study of global networks and multiple flows across national borders.

Table 4.4 Conceptualizing globalization: three tendencies/waves

Source: Adapted from Held et al. (1999: 10).

	Hyperglobalizers Ohmae 1990, 1995; Albrow 1997	Sceptics Boyer and Drache 1996; Hirst 1997; Hirst and Thompson 1999	Transformationalists Sassen 1991; Rosenau 1997; Held et al. 1999
What's new?	A global age	Trading blocs, weaker geo-governance than in earlier periods	Historically unprecedented levels of global interconnectedness
Dominant features?	Global capitalism, global governance, global civil society	World less interdependent than in the 1890s	'Thick' (intensive and extensive) globalization
Power of national governments?	Declining or eroding	Reinforced or enhanced	Reconstituted, restructured
Driving forces of globalization?	Capitalism and technology	Governments and markets	Combined forces of modernity
Pattern of stratification?	Erosion of old hierarchies	Increased marginalization of the South	New architecture of world order
Dominant motif?	McDonald's, Madonna, etc.	National interest	Transformation of political community
Conceptualization of globalization?	A reordering of the framework of human action	Internationalization and regionalization	Reordering of inter-regional relations and action at a distance
Historical trajectory?	Global civilization	Regional blocs/clash of civilizations	Indeterminate: global integration and fragmentation
Summary argument	The end of the nation-state	Internationalization depends on government acquiescence and support	Globalization transforming government power and world politics

Sceptics

Second-wave arguments are rooted in the sceptical view that globalization is overstated. Most globalization theories, say sceptics, amount to regulatory systems that stepped in as 'lender-of-last-resort' to protect their own economies. National governments remain key

players because they are involved in regulating and coordinating economic activity, and some are driving through trade agreements and policies to promote economic liberalization.

Sceptics agree that there may be more contact between countries than in previous eras, but there is insufficient integration to constitute a single, global economy. This is because the bulk of trade occurs within just three regional groups – Europe, Japan/East Asia and North America – rather than in a genuinely global context. The countries of the European Union, for example, trade predominantly among themselves, and the same is true of the other regional groups, thereby invalidating the concept of a global economy (Hirst 1997).

As a result, many sceptics focus on processes of *regionalization* within the world economy, including the emergence of regional financial and trading blocs. Indeed, the growth of [regionalization](#) is evidence that the world economy has become *less* rather than more integrated (Boyer and Drache 1996; Hirst et al. 2009). Compared with the patterns of trade that prevailed a century ago, the world economy is actually less global in its geographical scope and more concentrated in intense pockets of activity. In this sense, hyperglobalizers are just misreading the historical evidence.

Transformationalists

Transformationalists take a position somewhere between those of sceptics and hyperglobalizers, contending that globalization is breaking down established boundaries between the internal and the external, the international and the domestic. Yet many older patterns remain, and national governments retain a good deal of power and influence. Rather than losing sovereignty, nation-states are restructuring and pooling it in response to new forms of economic and social organization that are non-territorial (Thomas 2007). These include corporations, social movements and international bodies. The transformationalist argument is that we no longer live in a state-centric world, but states are adopting a more active, outward-looking stance towards governance under complex conditions of globalization (Rosenau 1997).

On this argument, it is also wrong to see fullblown globalization as inevitable or beyond the control of citizens and governments. In fact, globalization is a dynamic, open process that is subject to many influences and is constantly changing. On this view, globalization proceeds in an uneven and often contradictory fashion, encompassing tendencies that operate in opposition to each another (Randeria 2007). There is a two-way flow of images, information and influences from the global to the local, but also in the opposite direction. Global migration, international tourism, mass media and telecommunications contribute to the diffusion of widely varying cultural influences, and the world's vibrant 'global cities', such as London, New York and Tokyo, are thoroughly multicultural, with ethnic groups and cultures intersecting, sharing and living side by side (Sassen 1991).

In summary, transformationalists view globalization as a decentred, reflexive process characterized by links and cultural flows that work in a multidirectional way. Because it is the outcome of numerous intertwined global networks, it is not driven by the USA (Americanization), 'the West' (Westernization) or any other part of the world (Held et al. 1999). Nor is globalization a new form of colonialism or imperialism, as the process is open to influence from every part of the world. However, Osterhammel and Petersson (2005) argue that we should use the term 'globalization' only when relations across the world have acquired 'a certain degree of regularity and stability and where they affect more than tiny numbers of people.' In the future, global networks and relationships must develop into global institutions if the process is to become more permanent and the dominant factor in shaping human affairs.

Globalization, regionalization or something else?

The 2008 global financial crisis brought home some of the risks inherent in an emerging 'borderless economy'. In the European Union, huge economic bailouts of the Republic of Ireland, Cyprus, Greece and Portugal led to renewed questioning of the single currency and the logic of 'ever closer union'. Is this an early sign that a gradual centrifugal tendency towards looser integration has begun to take hold in the EU? Have two major global crises of the twenty-first century – the 2008

financial crash and the 2019–20 pandemic – shown that citizens still turn to their own nation-states for solutions rather than relying on supranational bodies?

In many European countries there has been a backlash against increasing migration into Europe and the principle of freedom of movement within the EU. Recent years have seen the rise and electoral success of populist, nationalist parties in Hungary, Slovakia, Poland and the Czech Republic (Gosling 2019). In 2016, concern about large-scale immigration from EU countries was also a factor in the UK's vote to leave the EU, as many voters favoured additional controls over the level and type of inward migration. The kind of borderless world forecast by hyberglobalizers is at odds with a continuing identification with 'the nation' and rising nationalist sentiment in politics.

Right-wing political movements and parties prioritize national identity over any benefits globalization may bring, but other political and social movements do not oppose globalization *per se*. During the 1990s, movements developed across the world that were highly critical of the capitalist free-market version of globalization but did not reject closer global connectedness. Rather, these movements promoted an alternative vision of what globalization could look like if ecological sustainability, human rights and community governance were at its heart. As a result, the varied groups and organizations – including the World Economic Forum – are known collectively as alter-globalization movements rather than being simply against globalization.

Populism and anti-/alter-globalization movements are discussed in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Historically, globalization is the product of conflict, wars and invasions just as much as cooperation and mutual help, which means that reversals of global trends such as national economic protectionism are always possible. Conflicts *have* made a major contribution to

globalization, but they also have the potential to send it into reverse. In the globalization debate, all three positions focus primarily on the *contemporary* process of rapid globalization and its consequences for the future. However, as we have noted, it is possible to set globalization processes into a much longer historical time frame. On this view, the extended development of human societies is leading *towards* more global patterns of interdependent relations, but this was not and still is not inevitable (Hopper 2007).

[Chapter 21](), 'Nations, War and Terrorism', contains an extended discussion of war and conflict.

Consequences of globalization

The main focus of sociology has conventionally been on the industrialized societies, with all other types of society being the province of anthropology. However, this academic division of labour has become less tenable as globalization proceeds. The Global South and Global North have long been interconnected, as the history of colonial expansion and empirebuilding demonstrates. People in the developed world depend on raw materials and manufactured products from developing countries, while the economic advancement of developing countries is enhanced by trading with the developed world. Globalization means the minority and majority 'worlds' are increasingly acknowledged as parts of one global human world.

As a result, the cultural map of the world also changes: networks of people span national borders and even continents, providing cultural connections between their birthplaces and adoptive countries (Appadurai 1986). Although there are between 5,000 and 6,000 languages spoken on the planet, around 98 per cent of these are used by just 10 per cent of the global population. A mere dozen languages have come to dominate the global language system, with more than 100

million speakers each: Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swahili. And just one language – English – has become 'hypercentral', as first choice for most second-language speakers. It is these 'bilinguals' who bind together the whole global language system that exists today (de Swaan 2001).

It is increasingly impossible for any society to exist in isolation from the rest of the human world, and there are few, if any, places left on Earth that are so remote as to escape radio, television, mobile phones, computers, air travel and the masses of tourists they bring. Today, people on every continent use tools made in China and other manufacturing centres, wear T-shirts and shorts manufactured in garment factories in the Dominican Republic or Guatemala, and take medicines manufactured in Germany or Switzerland to combat diseases contracted through contact with 'outsiders'. Yet we are also able to broadcast our individual stories around the globe via social media and to view cultural products from around the world through satellite television. But does globalization favour the major producers, especially the USA, and thus lead inexorably to a uniform global culture?

Glocalization not globalization

The rapid growth of digital technology and internet access is an important aspect of globalization theories, potentially spreading ideas of equality, free speech, democratic participation and consumer culture. Moreover, digital communications seem to foster such an outcome: global communication, apparently unlimited and uncensored information, and instant gratification are all characteristics of the worldwide web. But could this lead to the erosion of differences and the global dominance of Western ideals and culture? Such a conclusion may be premature.

A sea of rooftop satellite dishes surround the Ben Salah mosque in Marrakech, Morocco. Digital technology enables companies, advertisers and cultural producers to reach every part of the world. Yet this does not inevitably mean the weakening of local cultures, beliefs and practices.

Global society 4.3 Reggae – a global musical style?

When those knowledgeable about popular music listen to a song, they can often pick out the stylistic influences that helped shape it. Each musical style, after all, represents a unique way of combining rhythm, melody, harmony and lyrics. And, while it does not take a genius to notice the differences between rock, rap or folk, for example, musicians often combine a number of styles in composing songs. Different musical styles tend to emerge from different social groups, and studying how these combine and fuse is a good way to chart the cultural contact between social groups.

Some sociologists turned their attention to reggae music because it exemplifies the process whereby contacts between social groups result in the creation of new musical forms. Reggae's roots can be traced to West Africa. In the seventeenth century, large numbers of West Africans were enslaved by British colonists and brought by ship to work in the sugar-cane fields of the West Indies. Although the British attempted to prevent slaves from playing traditional African music for fear it would serve as a rallying cry to revolt, the slaves managed to keep alive the tradition of African drumming, sometimes by integrating it with European musical styles imposed by slave-owners. In Jamaica, the drumming of one group of slaves, the Burru, was openly tolerated by slave-owners because it helped meter the pace of their work. Slavery was finally abolished in Jamaica in 1834, but the tradition of Burru drumming continued, even as many Burru men migrated from rural areas to the slums of Kingston.

It was in these slums that a new religious cult began to emerge – one that would prove crucial to the development of reggae. In 1930, Haile Selassie was crowned emperor of Ethiopia. While opponents of European colonialism throughout the world cheered Selassie's ascension to the throne, some in the West Indies came to believe that he was a god, sent to Earth to lead the oppressed of Africa to freedom. One of Selassie's names was 'Prince Ras Tafari', and the

West Indians who worshipped him called themselves 'Rastafarians'. The Rastafarian cult soon merged with the Burru, and Rastafarian music combined Burru styles of drumming with biblical themes of oppression and liberation. In the 1950s, West Indian musicians began mixing Rastafarian rhythms and lyrics with elements of American jazz and black rhythm and blues. These combinations eventually developed first into 'ska' music and then, in the late 1960s, into reggae, with its relatively slow beat, its emphasis on bass and its stories of urban deprivation and of the power of collective social consciousness. Many reggae artists, such as Bob Marley, became commercial successes, and by the 1970s people the world over were listening to reggae music. In the 1980s and 1990s, reggae was fused with hip-hop (or rap) to produce new sounds (Hebdige 1997), heard in the work of the groups such as the Wu-Tang Clan, Shaggy or Sean Paul.

The history of reggae is thus the history of contact between different social groups and of the meanings – political, spiritual and personal – those groups expressed through their music. Globalization has increased the intensity of these contacts. It is now possible for a young musician in Scandinavia, for example, to grow up listening to music produced by men and women in the basements of Notting Hill in London and to be deeply influenced as well by, say, a mariachi performance broadcast live via satellite from Mexico City. If the number of contacts between groups is an important determinant of the pace of musical evolution, we can forecast that there will be a profusion of new styles in the coming years as the process of globalization develops.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Do your own research into the history and development of one current popular musical style, such as grime, hip-hop, K-pop, Arab pop, etc. Is this an example of musical globalization or are national influences more significant? What, if anything, does your example tell us about global-/glocalization?

There is some evidence that global forces may actually lead to the strengthening of traditional values and national identities. To capture the seemingly contradictory consequences of globalization, Robertson (1992) coined the term glocalization – a mixture of *globalization* and *localization*. Local communities are often active rather than passive in modifying and shaping global processes. Similarly, transnational companies tailor their products and services to take account of local conditions 'on the ground'. If this is so, then we may find that globalization does not lead inevitably to a uniform, global (Western) culture but, instead, allows for diversity and multidirectional flows of cultural products across the world's societies.

The Middle Eastern country of Kuwait is a traditional Islamic culture that recently experienced strong American and European influences. An oil-rich country on the Persian Gulf, Kuwait has one of the highest average per capita incomes in the world. The state provides free public education through to university level, resulting in high rates of literacy and education for both men and women. Kuwaiti television carries American football, with broadcasts interrupted for the traditional Muslim calls to prayer. Over 40 per cent of Kuwait's people are under the age of twenty-five, and, like their counterparts in Europe and North America, many surf the internet and use the latest digital devices. In many respects, then, Kuwait is a wealthy 'modern' country, yet traditional gender norms remain that treat men and women differently. Women are generally expected to wear traditional clothing that leaves only the face and hands visible and are forbidden to leave home at night or to be seen in public with a man who is not a spouse or relative.

The internet is increasingly popular with young people, and interview data suggest that the main attraction is that it enables young people to cross strictly enforced gender lines. Deborah Wheeler's (2006) interviews with male and female Kuwaiti students studying in the UK and the USA found that most reported communicating with the opposite sex as the most common use of the internet in a country which segregates men and women, even in internet cafés. One female student, Sabiha, reported that 'The main reason [the] internet is so popular with the Kuwaiti youth is because it's the most effective way for boys and girls to communicate with each other' (Wheeler 2006: 148). Another

interviewee, Buthayna, said that 'Girls especially cannot form relationships with boys, even as friends in many families in Kuwait, so the internet is a "safe" place I guess for them to do so. And the fact that the two sides don't know each other, they feel safer to voice their concerns, ideas, without having their reputations ruined or without it affecting their social life' (ibid.: 146). However, other women reported that some wellknown chatrooms had themselves gained a 'bad reputation' for explicit conversation, and just using them now risked girls and young women attracting the label of 'not being a decent girl'.

Kaposi (2014) reports that, in the period since Wheeler's study, internet use and social media have become normalized and young people now find that their parents and relatives also participate. One respondent in this ethnographic study, Maryam, said, 'I love Twitter. But now I'm starting to be careful with what I write, because of family and people I know starting to be there. It's really hard because … these people are really conservative and I'm more open.' Kaposi argues that this kind of online surveillance and community policing via gossip, rumour and reputational management shows just how porous is the boundary between online and offline worlds. It also shows that conventional interactional mechanisms from the physical social world, such as gossip, are not being superseded. Instead, they may be moving quite effortlessly into digital, online environments.

It also illustrates, in microcosm, how the global and the local interact through contemporary social media. Kuwaiti culture is not likely to be easily transformed by simple exposure to different beliefs and values online. The fact that young people participate in potentially global chatrooms and on social media does not mean that Kuwaiti culture will inevitably adopt the sexual attitudes or stances on gender of the West. The culture that eventually emerges from this process of glocalization is likely to remain recognizably Kuwaiti.

Reflexive individualism

Although globalization is often associated with macro changes in world markets, production and trade, and telecommunications, the effects of globalization are also felt in the private realm. Globalization is not something that is simply 'out there'; it is also 'in here', affecting people's

intimate and personal lives in diverse ways. Inevitably, personal lives have been altered as globalizing forces enter local contexts, homes and communities through impersonal sources – such as the media and popular culture – and through personal contact with people from other countries.

Today people have much more opportunity to shape their own lives than in the past, when the main influences were tradition and custom. Social class, gender, ethnicity and even religious affiliation could close off some life avenues and open up others. In the past, being born the eldest son of a tailor, for example, would probably ensure a young man would learn his father's craft and practise it throughout his lifetime. Tradition held that a woman's natural place was in the home, with her life and identity defined largely by those of her husband or father. Personal identities were formed within the context of the community into which people were born, and the values, lifestyles and ethics of the community provided a relatively fixed guide for life.

Classic studies 4.2 Anthony Giddens: riding the juggernaut of modernity

The research problem

What impact is globalization likely to have on people's everyday lives? How will globalization change the modern world that we all increasingly inhabit? In a series of books, articles and lectures since the early 1990s, Anthony Giddens has tried to explore the characteristics of the emerging global form of modernity and its consequences for everyday life (1991a, 1991b, 1993, 2001). In particular, he has been interested in the decline of tradition, our increasing risk awareness and the changing nature of trust in relationships.

Giddens's explanation

In *The Consequences of Modernity* (1991b), Giddens outlined his view that the global spread of modernity tends to produce a 'runaway world' in which, it appears, no one and no government is in overall control. While Marx used the image of a monster to describe capitalist modernity, Giddens (ibid.: 139) likens it to riding on board a large truck:

> I suggest we should substitute that of the juggernaut – a runaway engine of enormous power, which, collectively as human beings, we can drive to some extent but which also threatens to rush out of our control and which could rend itself asunder. The juggernaut crushes those who resist it, and while it sometimes seems to have a steady path, there are times when it veers away erratically in directions we cannot foresee. The ride is by no means unpleasant or unrewarding; it can often be exhilarating and charged with hopeful anticipation. But, as long as the institutions of modernity endure, we shall never be able to control completely either the path or the pace of the journey.

The globalizing form of modernity is marked by new uncertainties, risks and changes to people's trust in others and social institutions.

In a world of rapid change, traditional forms of trust are dissolved. Our trust in other people used to be based in local communities, but in globalized societies our lives are influenced by people we never meet or know, who may live on the far side of the world from us. Such impersonal relationships mean we are pushed to 'trust' or have confidence in 'abstract systems', such as food production, environmental regulation agencies or international banking systems. In this way, trust and risk are closely bound together. Trust in authorities is necessary if we are to confront the risks around us and react to them in an effective way. However, *this* type of trust is not habitually given but is the subject of reflection and revision.

When societies were more reliant on knowledge gained from custom and tradition, people could follow established ways of doing things without much reflection. For modern people, aspects of life that earlier generations were able to take for granted become matters of open decision-making, producing what Giddens calls 'reflexivity' – the continuous reflection on our everyday actions and the re-formation of these in the light of new knowledge. For example, whether to marry (or divorce) is a very personal decision, which may take account of the advice of family and friends. But official statistics and sociological research on marriage and divorce also filter into social life, becoming widely known and shared, thus becoming part of an individual's decision-making.

For Giddens, these characteristic features point to the conclusion that global modernity is a form of social life that is discontinuous with previous ones. In many ways, the globalization of modernity marks not the end of modern societies or a movement beyond them (as in *post*modernism – see [chapter 3](#)) but a new stage of 'late' or 'high' modernity which takes the tendencies embedded within modern life into a more far-reaching global phase.

Critical points

Giddens's critics argue that perhaps he exaggerates the discontinuity between modernity and previous societies and that tradition and habit continue to structure people's everyday activities. The modern period is not so unique, they say, and modern

people are not so different from those who went before. Others think that his account of globalizing modernity underplays the central sociological question of power – in particular that of transnational corporations to promote a form of globalization that privileges their needs at the expense of the world's poor. The concept of 'modernity' essentially masks the power of capitalist corporations.

Some critics also argue that Giddens sees reflexivity in almost wholly positive terms, reflecting the opening up of social life to more choice. However, such reflexivity could also be leading to heightened levels of 'anomie', as described by Durkheim, and, in that sense, reflexivity may be more of a problem to be solved than a welcome development to be promoted.

Contemporary significance

Because theories of globalization are relatively recent and Giddens continues to develop his theories of modern life, these constitute very much a 'work in progress'. The ideas he has developed have been taken in fruitful directions by other sociologists, and, in that sense, he has provided a theoretical framework and some conceptual tools for younger generations to take forward. As is evident from the contribution of the critics of his work on modernity, reflexivity and trust relationships, this has provoked much sociological debate. No doubt it will continue to do so in the future and readers will come to their own assessment of it.

Under conditions of globalization, people are faced with a new *individualism*, in which they actively construct their own identities. The social codes that previously guided people's choices and activities have significantly loosened. That eldest son of a tailor could now choose numerous paths to construct his future, and women are no longer restricted to the domestic realm. Girls do better than boys in most school subjects, women make up a majority of students in higher education, and more women work in the formal economy than before the 1960s and 1970s, often in jobs with attractive career paths. The social norms that guided an older generation's gendered expectations

are no longer appropriate for the lives of their children as norms continue to change.

Globalization processes press people to live in more open, reflexive ways, responding and adjusting to their changing environment. Even the small choices we make in our daily lives – what we wear, how we spend our leisure time, and how we take care of our health and our bodies – are part of the ongoing process of creation and re-creation of self-identity. A simple conclusion is to say that people in many countries today have lost a clear sense of belonging but gained more freedom of choice. Whether this constitutes 'progress' is part of continuing debates on the pros and cons of globalization.

How to govern a global society?

As globalization progresses, existing political structures and models seem inadequate for a world full of challenges that transcend national borders. In particular, national governments cannot individually control oil and energy prices or the spread of disease pandemics, tackle global warming and organized crime, or regulate volatile financial markets. There is no global government or world parliament and no one votes in a global election. And yet,

> … on any given day, mail is delivered across borders; people travel from one country to another via a variety of transport modes; goods and services are freighted across land, air, sea and cyberspace; and a whole range of other cross-border activities takes place in the reasonable expectation of safety and security for the people, groups, firms and governments involved … This immediately raises a puzzle: How is the world governed even in the absence of a world government to produce norms, codes of conduct, and regulatory, surveillance, and compliance instruments? (Weiss and Thakur 2010: 1)

The question is apposite, but on reflection we can see that it conflates *government* with *governance*. While government is a set of institutions with executive power over a given territory, governance is less tangible. Precisely because there is no world government or any prospect of one, some scholars have called instead for more effective global governance as a way of addressing global issues. The first book title on the subject was published in 1993, but since then there have been well over 500 academic books on global governance (Harman and Williams 2013: 2).

Global governance is a concept that aims to capture all those rules and norms, policies, institutions and practices through which global humanity orders its collective affairs. In this sense we already have some global governance in the form of international law, the UN Security Council, the International Atomic Energy Agency, multilateral treaties, and norms of conflict and conflict resolution, alongside institutions such as the United Nations, World Health Organization,

International Monetary Fund and World Bank. In 1995, in the wake of the demise of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, a UN report, *Our Global Neighbourhood*, argued for a version of global governance: a 'broad, dynamic, complex process of interactive decision-making that is constantly evolving and responding to changing circumstances' (UN Commission on Global Governance 2005 [1995]: 27). It also suggested that a shared, global, civic ethic needs to be developed.

However, the architecture of global governance remains largely *inter-national* rather than truly global, as it was designed in an age of competing nation-states, assumed the state was the primary actor, and relied on powerful states to enforce the rules. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2019–20 saw individual nation-states pursuing a range of strategies to protect their own citizens, with no coordinated set of actions. The WHO produced data on the global spread of the virus and some general guidance on infection control measures, but it was nation-state governments which made the key decisions on how to tackle the pandemic. Similarly, the EU was slow to provide financial assistance to the union's worst affected countries – such as Spain and Italy – amid differing views on how to help and at what level, before finally agreeing to a €540 billion recovery fund (*The Guardian* 2020a). National governments were clearly in control.

Yet global issues and problems are outgrowing the state-centred international system. Although the case for strengthening global governance appears sound, it is far from easy to achieve. Nation-states and large corporations compete with one another, while citizens' affiliation to their imagined communities represented by 'the nation' is as much an emotional matter as a logical or rational one. Moving beyond nation-state-based thinking is implied in theories of globalization, but there is some evidence that globalization also produces a nationalist and populist backlash (discussed above) (Rodrik 2018). Some activists are also suspicious of the very idea of global governance, which they fear may be just a dangerous but acceptable term for an emergent and possibly tyrannical 'world government' by political and economic elites (Sinclair 2012: 6).

There is a discussion of global governance in [chapter 20](#), 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

It may seem optimistic, even unrealistic, to speak of global ethics or governance beyond the nation-state, but perhaps these goals are not quite as fanciful as at first they sound. The creation of new rules and norms and more effective regulatory institutions is certainly not misplaced when global interdependence and the rapid pace of change link all of us together more than ever before. Indeed, as the global issues of terrorism, pandemic control, environmental damage, climate change, transnational criminal networks, human trafficking and global financial crises show, better global governance is becoming ever more necessary.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. What are the central characteristics of the following: hunting and gathering societies, pastoral societies and agrarian societies.

2. In what ways did cities in traditional states and civilizations differ from modern cities?

3. Why is the Global South/Global North classification scheme said to be an improvement on previous schemes by its advocates?

4. Outline Wallerstein's world-systems theory. How would this theory account for the experience of newly industrializing countries (NICs)?

5. Provide some examples from the chapter which illustrate the significance of *economic, socio-cultural* and *political* factors in the production of social change.

6. What is meant by g*lobalization?* Using two examples, explain how the concept of *glocalization* differs from globalization.

7. List some of the factors contributing to the contemporary phase of globalization. Do economic factors underpin the socio-cultural or the political ones?

8. Outline the main arguments of hyperglobalizers, sceptics and transformationalists.

9. List some consequences of globalization. Are these likely to be mainly positive or negative for 'development' in the Global South?

10. What is global governance? List some contributory examples. Is global governance likely to be enough to tackle global warming effectively?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

The Western biomedical model, rooted in scientific methods, is widely seen as the most effective form of medicine and forms the basis for most national healthcare systems. However, complementary and alternative therapies have grown in popularity in the developed societies, with some, such as acupuncture and homeopathy, partially integrated into biomedical health systems. Studying the globalization of medical knowledge and practices could provide useful insights into the debate between advocates of globalization and glocalization.

It seems obvious that successful biomedicine is an example of globalization spreading outwards from the 'West' to 'the rest'. But is this correct? Are there medical success stories moving in the opposite direction? And, if there are, have they changed in the process or are they changing biomedical practice? The article below approaches this issue by exploring the travels of Indian ayurvedic medicine. Is there a 'global ayurveda'? Read the paper and answer the questions that follow.

> Sujatha, V. (2020) 'The Universal and the Global: Contextualizing European Ayurvedic Practices', *Society and Culture in South Asia*, 6(1): 52–73.
>
> 1. What methods were used in this research? Where was it carried out?
>
> 2. The author identifies three phases in the movement of ayurveda into European societies since the 1980s. What are they?
>
> 3. Which elements of ayurveda are said to have global potential? Why are some elements unlikely to be adopted in Europe?
>
> 4. Outline how ayurveda made its way into Europe. Why was the method of transmission particularly significant in relation to its reputation and take-up?
>
> 5. 'The case of ayurvedic medicine in Europe is an example of glocalization.' List some reasons for and against this proposition, drawing on this paper and the ideas of Roland Robertson (discussed in this chapter).

⚙️ **Thinking it through**

If globalization is real and effective, then academic research is not immune from its impact. For example, we might expect that social science publications in the first half of the twentieth century would be dominated by European and North American scholars, but, by the start of the twenty-first century, research from all around the world would be making an equal impact.

Read this article:

> Mosbah-Natanson, S., and Gingras, Y. (2014) 'The Globalization of Social Sciences? Evidence from a Quantitative Analysis of 30 Years of Production, Collaboration and Citations in the Social Sciences (1980–2009)', *Current Sociology*, 62(5): 626–46.

Set out the paper's main argument that Europe and North America remain the dominant forces in the production of social scientific journal articles and consider the following:

- Why have other regions not made the kind of breakthrough we might expect?

- What evidence do the authors introduce to show that researchers in 'peripheral' regions still show deference to those from the 'centre'?

- How successful is this model of 'centre–periphery'?

- What, if anything, do we learn about globalization from this paper?

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Music is often the first art form to embody socio-economic change, in production methods, styles, content and geographical spread. We might expect to find that globalization is easier to see in musical trends than other forms and perhaps even more so in popular music, which more readily allows for mixing and blending of regional traditions and musical trends. One simple example is that songwriters, singers, bands, producers and distributors from around the world collaborate in ways that were previously more difficult.

Listen to a 2019 podcast debate on this subject here and address the questions below:

> 'The 2010s: The Globalization of Music', 31 October 2019, www.npr.org/2019/10/07/767904453/the-2010s-the-globalization-of-music?t=1582886387558.

- What examples and artists are discussed that may signal the erosion of single-genre pop music today?

- What evidence is there that collaborations and mixing/blending of styles in music illustrates a shift in power relations away from the USA and Europe?

- How has the emergence and rapid growth of digital technology, music streaming and online environments facilitated the globalization of music?

- If Western-based artists adopt the musical style of, say, Korean K-pop, is this an example of globalization, of glocalization, or simply a form of appropriation by the more powerful cultures?

- Thinking back to our discussion of economic, political and cultural forms of globalization, what evidence is there that one of these forms is the primary driver of the globalization of music?

Further reading

The subject matter of this chapter is so wide-ranging that a single book will not cover it. But there are two formats you should find useful. First are those that cover global human history and the development of societies. Noel Cowen's (2001) *Global History: A Short Overview* (Cambridge: Polity) is a well-written, concise, yet comprehensive account which assumes no specialist knowledge. Bruce Mazlish's (2006) *The New Global History* (London: Routledge) traces global history and globalization processes over the long term, linking historical and sociological approaches.

Second are those books that deal with current theories and debates on globalization. You could try Manfred B. Steger's (2017) *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) or George Ritzer and Paul Dean's (2015) *Globalization: A Basic Text* (2nd edn, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell), which covers global governance and other key aspects of the main debates. Luke Martell's (2017) *Sociology of Globalization* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity) is a wide-ranging review.

Paul Hirst, Grahame Thompson and Simon Bromley's (2009) *Globalization in Question* (3rd edn, Cambridge: Polity) provides an essential critique. Paul Hopper's (2007) *Understanding Cultural Globalization* (Cambridge: Polity) does exactly what it says, and Thomas G. Weiss's (2013) *Global Governance: Why? What? Whither?* (Cambridge: Polity) is a lively discussion of this subject. Collectively these three cover some key economic, cultural and political aspects of globalization.

The Globalization Reader (2020) (6th edn, ed. Frank J. Lechter and John Boli, Chichester: Wiley) is a very comprehensive collection covering a broad range of subjects, and *A Dictionary of World History* (2006) (2nd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press) is a useful resource.

Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

TimeMaps information on hunter-gatherers – covers hunter-gatherers, agrarian societies and early civilizations:
www.timemaps.com/hunter-gatherer

The 1999 Reith Lectures – Anthony Giddens on 'The runaway world':
http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/events/reith_99/

International Forum on Globalization – an alliance of activists, scholars and researchers interested in globalization processes:
www.ifg.org/

Yale Center for the Study of Globalization – exactly what it says it is:
https://ycsg.yale.edu/

Centre for Research on Globalization – Canadian-based 'think site' with lots of comment by researchers and academics:
www.globalresearch.ca/

Global Policy Forum – monitors policy-making at the United Nations:
www.globalpolicy.org/

UCL Global Governance Institute – UCL centre for cross-disciplinary research on tackling global social problems:
https://www.ucl.ac.uk/global-governance/

BBC World Service on globalization – some basic information on aspects of 'global society':
www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/programmes/globalisation/

CHAPTER 5

THE ENVIRONMENT

CONTENTS

Environmental campaigners call on governments to declare a 'climate emergency' and to take radical action to reduce CO_2 emissions to combat global warming.

In April 2019, key roads in the centre of London were effectively blocked for several days by activists from an environmental group, Extinction Rebellion (XR). This was part of an international protest across at least thirty-three countries, including Australia, India, the USA and a number of European states. The campaigners aimed to raise awareness of the seriousness of climate change and to push governments to do much more to bring down carbon dioxide emissions more quickly. The London protest had an immediate impact. On 1 May, the UK Parliament passed a motion to declare an 'environment and climate emergency', becoming the first to do so. But what is the emergency?

The XR protest made direct reference to a special report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an international group of scientists monitoring climate change (IPCC 2019). This report said that the risks posed by climate change for both natural ecosystems and human societies would be more manageable if global warming did not exceed 1.5ºC above pre-industrial levels. On present trends that 1.5ºC

limit would be reached between 2030 and 2052, but it could be stabilized at that level if global carbon emissions from human activities were radically reduced to 'net zero' as soon as possible (ibid.: 6). The XR protests castigated governments for dragging their feet on achieving this goal. For instance, the UK, France and New Zealand have a target to reach zero net CO_2 emissions by 2050, Scotland and Sweden by 2045, and Iceland by 2040 (Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit 2018). And though all of these targets are compatible with the international climate agreement made in Paris in 2015, which set 2050 as the net zero target date, campaigners want to see faster progress.

Climate change or global warming (sometimes called global heating) has been widely described as the defining issue of our time, with young people becoming increasingly active in campaigns to tackle the problem. Yet, despite notable exceptions, sociology can also be said to have 'dragged its feet', failing to integrate environmental issues such as this into the mainstream of the discipline. Arguably the main reason for this is that 'the environment' appears to be something that natural scientists, rather than social scientists, are trained to deal with. What do sociologists know about the changing climate, oceanic pollution or biodiversity loss?

Although this point seems pertinent, a moment's reflection tells us that, if climate change *is* largely anthropogenic or 'human caused', then the discipline that focuses on the human societies and economic regimes that bring it about is sociology. Similarly, plastic pollution in the world's rivers and oceans and the destruction of habitat that leads to large-scale species extinctions are the consequence of the material ways of life that human societies have created. Indeed, without sociological knowledge of capitalist economies, consumer culture, collective action and behavioural change, it is unlikely that we can reach a realistic assessment of which mitigation strategies and government initiatives are likely to be successful in solving environmental problems.

We will return to global warming and relevant sociological theories and perspectives later in the chapter. But we must start with shifting ideas of 'nature' and 'environment' and what constitutes an 'environmental issue' before outlining sociological approaches to their study. From here we discuss some important environmental issues and sociological

theories of consumerism and the risk society, together with proposals aimed at dealing with environmental dilemmas such as sustainable development and ecological modernization. The chapter ends with an investigation into how justice and citizenship may be extended to take in natural environments, and we look ahead to the future of society–environment relations.

Nature, environment and society

From nature to environment

Environmental issues always involve nature in some way, but 'nature' is not a simple word with a single meaning. In fact, dictionary definitions describe around twelve distinct meanings of the word. Raymond Williams (1987) says that nature is one of the most complex and difficult words in the English language because its dominant meaning has changed often, along with the development of societies.

'Nature' can mean something that is *essential* to a person, an animal or a thing. Why do some birds build their nests at the same time every year, for instance? We may be told that this is instinctive behaviour and an essential part of the 'nature' of the birds. In fourteenthcentury Europe, however, a new dominant meaning began to emerge. Nature came to be seen as a *series of forces* that directed the world and ultimately explained why things happen. For example, even today many people consult astrological charts, looking for their birth-date-based 'star sign' and the life guidance it can offer. When they do this, they implicitly draw on this same idea of 'natural forces' – in this case, the movement of stars and planets – directing human affairs.

By the nineteenth century, the dominant meaning of 'nature' had changed again. This time nature was seen as the whole non-human *material world* rather than as a series of forces. The natural world was a world full of *natural things*: animals, fields, mountains, and much more. For instance, there was a trend towards looking at 'scenery' as landscapes and pictorials, with nature literally framed for our appreciation and enjoyment. Similarly, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century naturalists collected and classified natural 'things', creating plant and animal taxonomies that are still in use today.

Two major and related causes of this latest change were industrialization, which shifted people away from working the land, and urbanization, which led to larger human settlements and new living environments largely divorced from working the land (Thomas

1984). Nature was now seen as an obstacle that society had to tame and master in order to make progress. Humans can now fly (in planes), cross oceans (in ships) and even orbit the planet (in spacecraft) despite their having no innate ability to do these things. Catton and Dunlap (1978) argue that the technological advances of the industrial age produced an ideology of 'human exemptionalism' – the widely accepted idea that, unlike all other animals, the human species was practically exempt and could overcome natural laws.

From the seventeenth century, high-status groups in Britain began to take pleasure in landscape scenes, which became the focus of the early 'tourist gaze' (Urry 2002).

Yet, for a minority of people, nature was not in any need of taming. Instead, industrial society was the problem, polluting and wasting nature to feed new urban lifestyles. Wild nature needed protection, not domestication. Nevertheless, for both the tamers and the protectors, society and nature were now seen as *separate things*. Nature was that which society was not, and vice versa. This meaning remains the

dominant one today, though more people would probably agree with the nature protectors than did so in earlier periods.

Since the 1950s, use of the word 'nature' started to give way to another term: the environment. Dictionary definitions of 'environment' suggest that it is the external conditions or surroundings of people, especially those in which they live or work. David Harvey (1993) notes that this definition can apply to a number of situations. For example, we have a working environment, a business environment and an urban environment. But most people would probably expect this chapter to discuss pollution, climate change, and so on, indicating that *the* environment has taken on a widespread and special meaning. *The* environment is assumed to mean all of those non-human, natural surroundings within which human beings exist – sometimes called the 'natural environment' – and in its broadest sense this is planet Earth as a whole. We will use this as our working definition throughout this chapter.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Are human beings animals that form part of the natural world? If they are, why are cities and urban areas often seen as artificial? If not, what exactly are human beings?

Sociology and the environment

Earthquakes are by no means uncommon. Christchurch, New Zealand (2011), Haiti (2010), Muzzafarabad, Kashmir (2005), and Aceh, Indonesia (2004), all experienced twenty-first-century quakes which collectively killed over half a million people and made millions more homeless. Earthquakes and the tsunamis they often generate are reminders that the natural environment is not simply an inert, passive backdrop to the dramas played out in social and political life. It is an active force which plays a significant role in shaping societies.

On 11 March 2011, the most powerful earthquake ever to affect Japan, with a magnitude of 9.0, occurred off the eastern coast, producing tsunami waves up to 40 metres high which rolled into the Tōhoku

region. Travelling up to 10 kilometres, the tsunami swept all before it; buildings, vehicles, power lines and people were all caught up in the disaster. At least 15,000 people were killed, more than 9,000 went missing and another 5,000 were injured. Cooling systems failed at the coastal Fukushima nuclear reactor site, and a state of emergency was declared as food products, tap water and soil samples were all reported to be contaminated with radioactive matter. The Japanese government announced that it would be reviewing its energy policy, particularly Japan's reliance on nuclear power, to ensure the country's future energy security. What role is there for sociologists in understanding and explaining an environmental issue such as this?

First, sociology can help us to understand how environmental problems are distributed. For instance, global warming – the increase in global average surface temperature – affects everyone on the planet, but in different ways. Flooding affects people in both rich and poor countries, but it kills many more people in low-lying, poor countries, such as Bangladesh, where housing and emergency infrastructure are less able to cope with severe weather than in Europe, where expensive flood defence projects have been put in place. In the wealthy countries, such as the USA, issues raised by global warming are likely to concern indirect effects, such as rising levels of immigration as people try to enter the country from areas more directly affected by, for example, food insecurity.

Second, sociologists can provide accounts of how patterns of human behaviour create pressure on the natural environment (Cylke 1993). Many of the environmental challenges discussed in this chapter – such as pollution from diesel vehicles – are examples of these pressures. The levels of pollution already produced by industrialized countries would be greatly intensified if repeated across developing nations. If the impoverished regions of the world are to 'catch up' with the richer ones, then citizens of the rich world may have to revise their expectations about continuous economic growth. Sociological theories of capitalist expansion, globalization or rationalization can help us to understand how human societies are transforming their environment.

Third, sociology can help us to evaluate policies and proposals aimed at providing solutions to environmental problems. Before the Tōhoku

earthquake and tsunami in Japan, many governments had begun re-evaluating the option of nuclear power. Anti-nuclear campaigns in the 1980s were successful in raising concerns about the safety of underground disposal for radioactive nuclear waste, and governments eventually turned away from the nuclear industry. Yet today's uncertainties about oil and gas supplies, energy security and the need to reduce carbon emissions to tackle global warming have brought the nuclear power option back into contention. Given the negligible carbon emissions produced by nuclear reactors, concern with safety now has to be weighed against the environmental benefits. Analysing how different groups put together their claims and counter-claims about environmental problems deepens our understanding of the issues involved – an essential prerequisite for informed public debate.

Similarly, some environmental activists and 'green' writers argue that people in the rich countries must turn away from capitalist consumerism and return to simpler ways of living close to the land to avoid ecological disaster (Devall 1990; Cowie and Heathcott 2003; Elgin 2010). They maintain that rescuing the global environment will mean radical social as well as technological changes. Yet, given the wide global inequalities that currently exist, there is little chance that poorer countries will sacrifice their economic growth because of environmental problems created by the rich countries. Indeed, some governments in developing countries have argued that there is no parallel between the 'luxury emissions' of the developed world and their own 'survival emissions'. Sociological accounts of international relations and global inequality can clarify some of the underlying causes of the environmental problems we face today.

Sociology's founders – Marx, Durkheim and Weber – paid little attention to what we now call 'environmental issues'. The relationship between human societies and the natural environment was not their central concern. Instead, they focused on social inequality, poverty and its alleviation, and assessing the direction of industrial development. This situation became problematic once sociologists began to explore the issues identified by environmental campaigners in the 1970s. Could the classics provide any insights into human–environment relations? Some sociologists *have* returned to classical sociology, reinterpreting

the classics in the light of environmental issues (Dickens 2004; Dunlap et al. 2002; Murphy 1997). However, most have not, and the majority of sociological studies of the environment have developed through a long-running dispute between social constructionist and critical realist approaches over just *how* environmental issues should be studied.

Theorizing the society–nature nexus

Social constructionism is an approach to studying social problems, including environmental issues. Social constructionists have investigated how some environmental issues come to be seen as significant and in need of urgent action, while others are considered less important or are largely ignored (Braun and Castree 1998; Hannigan 2006, 2014). Much depends on how the issue is framed *as a problem* that needs a policy response from government. Are the environmental problems considered most important today really the ones which are the most serious and in need of urgent action?

For more on social constructionism, see chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', and chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life'.

Constructionists ask a series of important questions. What is the *history of the problem* and how has it developed? *Who* is making the claim that it is a problem and do they have any vested interest and stand to benefit from doing so? *What do they say* about it and does the evidence support this? *How* do they say it? Do they use scientific, emotional, political or moral arguments? Who *opposes* the claim and on what grounds? Do opponents stand to lose if the claim is successful and could that, rather than the evidence, explain their opposition? Such questions give sociologists a clearly defined role in the study of environmental issues which no other discipline performs. They also add something new to our understanding of this area.

Social constructionists remind us that all environmental problems are, in part, socially created or 'constructed' by groups of people. Nature never 'speaks for itself', but people do claim to speak on its behalf. This process of construction can be examined, understood and explained, and thus the public should be in a better position to assess whether an environmental problem really is as serious as the claims-makers say it is.

Most environmental problems are socially created. For example, consumerism generates a huge amount of waste, which has conventionally been dumped in landfill sites.

For some sociologists, constructionism is problematic, as it tends to be 'agnostic' about the central problem at issue (Irwin 2001). For example, a constructionist study of biodiversity loss and species extinctions would tell us a lot about how this problem came to be seen as important, what arguments were made about it and who opposed the claim. But social constructionism does not offer a direct answer to the central scientific question – is biodiversity loss really a serious problem in need of urgent action? For environmental activists and those

committed to solving environmental problems, this is not helpful. Constructionism tells us a lot about people and social interactions but almost nothing about society–environment relations.

An alternative approach, known as 'environmental realism' (Bell 2004) or critical realism, looks at environmental issues in a scientific way, bringing together evidence from across the social and natural sciences to understand why environmental problems occur. Critical realism aims to get beneath the surface of the visible evidence to uncover the underlying 'causal mechanisms' of events and problems (Benton 1994; Dickens 1996, 2004; Martell 1994). In contrast to the agnosticism of social constructionists, critical realists are prepared to accept and debate knowledge and evidence from the natural and environmental sciences in their own analyses. 'Using your sociological imagination' 5.1, on BSE in the UK, illustrates some key points of this approach.

Realist approaches require the findings from a range of academic disciplines: biology, zoology, history, sociology, political science and more. Only in this way can we properly explain how and why BSE and vCJD posed such a problem in the 1980s and 1990s. Like constructionists, realists would agree that cows are social as well as natural creatures. Arguing a constructionist case, Alan Irwin says: 'The modern cow is the product of generations of human-controlled cattle-breeding, feeding and housing' (2001: 80). But, unlike constructionists, realists search for *causal mechanisms* and are prepared to explore and debate the natural science of environmental issues in ways that social constructionists do not. Critical realism takes into account the *objective reality* of natural objects and environments, and this means rethinking our sociological theories and concepts with this in mind.

From this brief sketch of these two approaches, we can say that social constructionism leads in the direction of a *sociology of the environment* that explores environmental issues from a conventional sociological standpoint, using concepts and theories from within the discipline. By contrast, critical realism leads towards an *environmental sociology*, which demands the revision of existing sociological approaches to take account of the complex intertwining of society and environment (Sutton 2007). However, as we will see in the chapter, many research

studies in this field tend to veer between these two apparently polarized alternatives.

Environmental issues

There are many environmental issues confronting the contemporary world, and we can only scratch the surface of these here. Some are local or regional in character, while others are international or genuinely global in their scale and impact. What they all share, and what makes them specifically environmental issues, is that they involve *both* social relationships *and* non-human, natural phenomena. In this sense, they are *hybrids* of society and environment (Irwin 2001: 26). Keep this point in mind when you read the rest of this section. We start with the major issue of our time, global warming.

Global warming

Based on global average surface temperature, 2016 was the warmest year on record, followed, in order, by 2019, 2015 and 2017. Nine of the ten warmest years recorded since reliable records began in the late nineteenth century have occurred since 2005 (NOAA 2019). Although the planet, on average, has warmed by around 1°C since 1880, the warming trend is forecast to continue, and even small rises such as this can have large impacts (IPCC 2015: 2). The effects of very hot weather from heatwaves can be catastrophic. The Earth Policy Institute, an environmental think tank, estimated that a heatwave in 2003 killed almost 40,000 people in Europe. France suffered the most, as 14,802 people died from causes attributable to the high temperatures, with older people being particularly affected (Bhattacharya 2003). Heatwaves are forecast to become more common in the future as warming alters the climate.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

5.1 Crossing the species barrier: the UK BSE crisis

In 1996, British government ministers admitted that at least ten recent human deaths had been caused by a new variant of Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (vCJD) in humans, which may have developed through people eating beef infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) during the 1980s. This was a huge shock. Millions of people had eaten beef in this period and, at least theoretically, could develop the disease. But how had this happened?

BSE is a fatal neurodegenerative disease of cattle whose symptoms – loss of coordination, nervousness, loss of memory and aggression (hence 'mad' cows) – are similar to those of Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (CJD) in human beings. From the experience of sheep farming, it was thought that BSE could not cross the species barrier into the human population. CJD is a recognized but very rare disease in human beings but is unrelated to BSE. The UK BSE inquiry (1998–2000) identified the cause of BSE in cattle as a gene mutation in a single cow (named Cow 133). The most widely accepted explanation for the *spread* of BSE is that cattle were being fed BSE-infected offal (Macnaghten and Urry 1998: 253–65). The inquiry report said that the problem was 'the recycling of animal protein in ruminant feed' and noted that the link between BSE and the human vCJD 'was now clearly established'. As of 2 November 2015, the National Creutzfeldt–Jakob Disease Surveillance Unit in Edinburgh reported that 177 people had died from vCJD. Meatrendering practices were changed and new rules brought in to prevent a recurrence, but public confidence in science, politics, regulatory bodies and the meat industry were thoroughly shaken by the events.

On the face of it, this seems like an episode of a naturally occurring disease in animals, unrelated to social processes. However, the

transmission and spread of BSE was the product of decisions taken within the animal feed production system. The previous assumption that BSE would not cross the species barrier was shown to be wrong. BSE-infected beef *did* lead to vCJD in humans. Treating cattle as commercial products and denying their herbivorous nature by feeding them dead animals produced an unexpected outcome that no one had forecast.

A critical realist approach would suggest that, to understand this event properly, we need to know what kind of creatures cows are: what are their natural capacities? We also need to understand human beings to know why the disease had such devastating effects on people. What happens when infected foodstuffs find their way into the human body? We also need to know how the food production system operates and what political and economic decisions were made that allowed dead animals to be fed to others. And we need culturally specific knowledge – just why do so many people eat so much beef in the UK?

THINKING CRITICALLY

How would social constructionists investigate the BSE epidemic and its consequences, as outlined above? What would be the focus of a constructionist investigation?

The environmental issue of global warming – a form of climate change – is the clearest example of a genuinely *global environmental* problem. Its effects will have an impact on every society on the planet, albeit to varying degrees. To understand it, we have to see 'the environment' in its widest sense – the Earth as a whole – as the atmosphere shrouds the entire planet rather than one region. The problem of global warming cannot be understood without modern science, and sociologists need to engage with debates on the science of climate change if they want to say anything useful about the matter.

What is global warming?

Global warming is regarded by many people as the most serious environmental challenge. If scientific forecasts are correct, then it has the potential to alter irreversibly the functioning of the Earth's climate, producing a series of devastating environmental consequences. Global warming refers to the gradual rise in the Earth's average surface temperature resulting from changes in the chemical composition of the atmosphere. The current scientific consensus is that this is caused in large measure by industrial processes which produce gases, notably CO_2, that have built up in the atmosphere.

Global warming is closely related to the concept of the greenhouse effect – the buildup of heat-trapping gases within the Earth's atmosphere. The principle is a simple one. Energy from the sun passes through the atmosphere and heats the Earth's surface. Although most of the solar radiation is absorbed directly, some of it is reflected back. The greenhouse gases act as a barrier to this outgoing energy, trapping heat within the atmosphere much like the glass panels of a greenhouse. A natural greenhouse effect keeps the Earth at a reasonably comfortable surface temperature – about 15.5°C. If it were not for the role of greenhouse gases in retaining heat, the Earth would be a very different place, with an average temperature of −17°C.

When concentrations of atmospheric greenhouse gases rise, the greenhouse effect is intensified and much warmer temperatures are produced. Since the start of industrialization, the concentration of greenhouse gases has risen significantly. Concentrations of carbon dioxide (CO_2, the main greenhouse gas) have increased by around 40 per cent since 1750 – the onset of modern industrialization; methane has increased by 150 per cent and nitrous oxide by 20 per cent (IPCC 2015: 44) (see 'Global society' 5.1).

Most climate scientists agree that the increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can be attributed to the burning of fossil fuels and other human activities, such as industrial production, large-scale agriculture, deforestation, mining and landfill, and vehicle emissions. The overall impact of these industrial processes is referred to as anthropogenic (human-created) climate change. The Industrial Revolution of the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the spread of industrialization around the globe have produced major, world-historical change.

The Fifth Assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 2015) reports that, on the basis of analyses comparing actual observations with a model forecast based only on natural climate changes and a second model based on natural changes *plus* anthropogenic climate change, it is *extremely likely* that the increase in observed temperatures since the mid-twentieth century is due to human activity. In the cautious scientific language of the IPCC, this means a probability of over 95 per cent. This is a much stronger conclusion than that arrived at in the Third and Fourth Assessment Reports of 2001 and 2007 respectively. Figure 5.1 shows the rising trend in surface temperature between 1910 and 2010 compared to the IPCC models.

THINKING CRITICALLY

How convinced are you by the scientific evidence for anthropogenic global warming presented above? Carry out a straw poll of your friends. Is there a collective view? Have any of them changed their behaviour on the basis of what they know about climate change?

[Global society 5.1](#) Greenhouse gases

Some greenhouse gases, such as carbon dioxide, occur naturally and are emitted to the atmosphere through natural processes and human activities. Others (e.g., fluorinated gases) are created and emitted solely through human activities. The principal greenhouse gases that enter the atmosphere because of human activities are:

- *Carbon dioxide (CO_2)*: Carbon dioxide enters the atmosphere through the burning of fossil fuels (oil, natural gas and coal), solid waste, trees and wood products, and as a result of other chemical reactions (e.g., manufacture of cement). It is also removed from the atmosphere (or 'sequestered') when it is absorbed by plants as part of the biological carbon cycle.

- *Methane (CH_4)*: Methane is emitted during the production and transport of coal, natural gas and oil. Methane emissions also result from livestock and other agricultural practices and through the decay of organic waste in municipal solid waste landfills.

- *Nitrous oxide (N_2O)*: Nitrous oxide is emitted during agricultural and industrial activities, as well as during combustion of fossil fuels and solid waste.

- *Fluorinated gases*: Hydrofluorocarbons, perfluorocarbons and sulfur hexafluoride are synthetic, powerful greenhouse gases that are emitted from a variety of industrial processes. Fluorinated gases are sometimes used as substitutes for ozone-depleting substances (i.e., CFCs, HCFCs and halons). These gases are typically emitted in smaller quantities but, because they are potent greenhouse gases, are sometimes referred to as High Global Warming Potential gases ('High GWP gases').

Source: US Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov/ghgemissions/overview-greenhouse-gases.

The potential consequences of global warming

The consequences of global warming will be unevenly experienced, with devastating outcomes for some regions and countries but not for all. The IPCC's Fourth Assessment Report (2007: 50–2) suggested a range of social impacts, some of the more significant of which are listed by region below.

1. Some 75 to 250 million people across Africa will experience greater stress on water supplies, and agricultural yields may fall by as much as 50 per cent, severely compromising access to adequate levels of food, increasing levels of undernourishment. The IPCC also forecast an increase in arid land by 2080 of between 5 and 8 per cent in Africa and that rising sea levels will affect low-lying coastal areas with large populations.

2. In Central, East, South and South-East Asia, availability of freshwater is forecast to be reduced by 2050, leading to increasing problems with water security. Coastal areas are likely to be subject to flooding from rivers and from the sea. As global warming changes the hydrological cycle, floods and drought will be more common.

3. In Latin America, eastern Amazonia is likely to see tropical forests becoming savannah as soils dry out, and semi-arid vegetation will be lost. Food security will be reduced as the productivity of crops and livestock declines and more people will be at risk of undernourishment and chronic hunger. Shifting rainfall patterns will lead to uncertain water supplies for drinking water and agriculture.

4. In Australia and New Zealand, the forecast is for a loss of biodiversity in important sites, including the Great Barrier Reef. Water insecurity will increase in southern and eastern Australia and parts of New Zealand. Agricultural production will decline in much of southern and eastern Australia and eastern New Zealand because of increasing droughts and fires.

5. In Europe, more frequent coastal flooding and erosion are expected as a result of sea level rise and more severe storms. Southern Europe will see more drought and higher temperatures that will reduce the availability of water and crop productivity.

Higher temperatures will worsen health problems arising from more frequent heatwaves.

6. North America will experience more intense and frequent heatwaves in cities that already have problems, bringing increasing health problems. Warming in the western mountains is likely to cause more flooding in winter and reduced flows in the summer months.

7. Rising sea levels are likely to present major challenges for many small island communities in the Pacific and Caribbean. Storm surges will be higher and erosion exacerbated, threatening communities and infrastructure. By the mid-twenty-first century, water resources are likely to be reduced to the point that they will not be sufficient to meet demand during times of low rainfall.
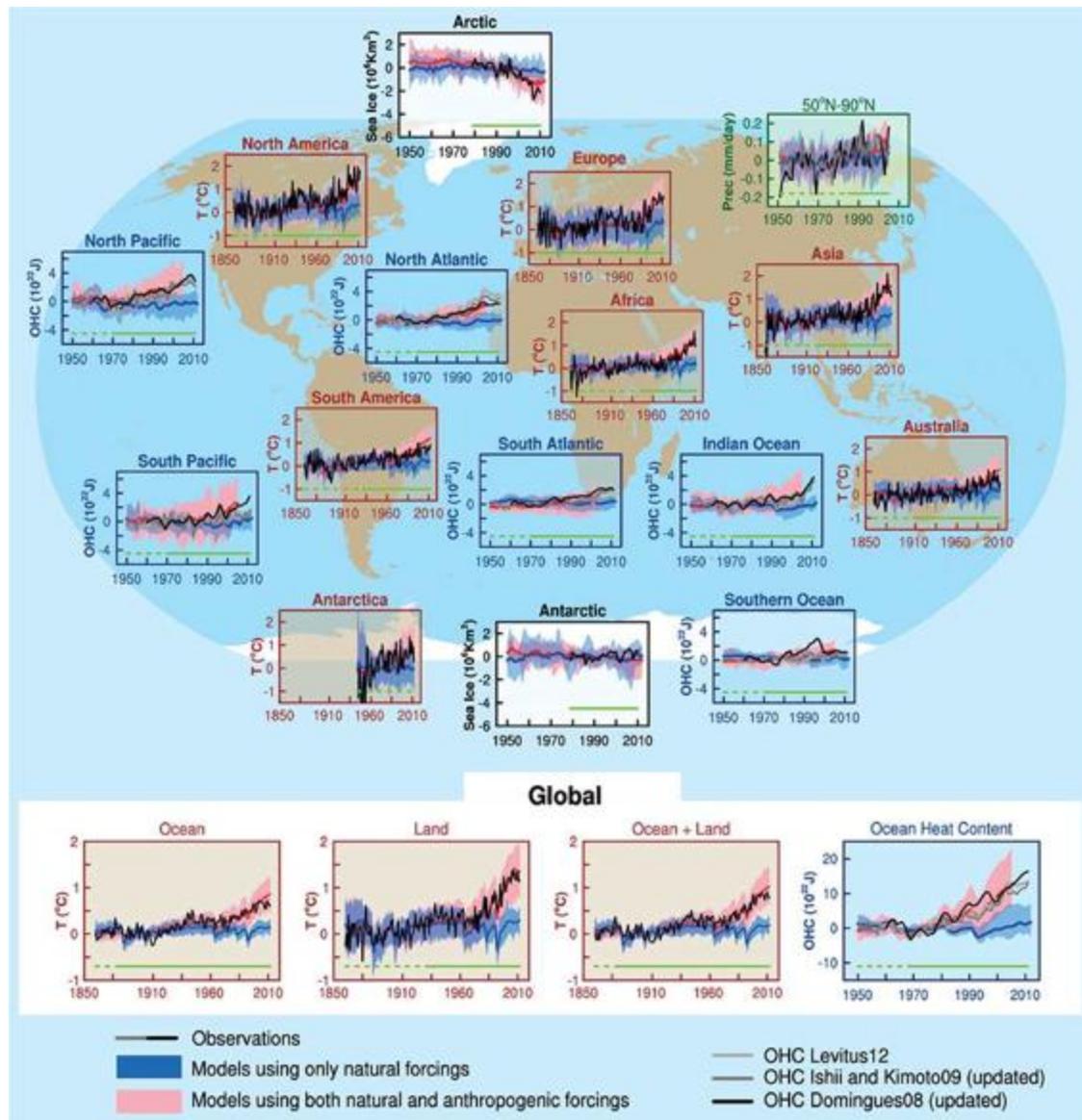
Figure 5.1 Global and regional temperature changes: observed, natural forcing, and natural plus anthropogenic forcing

Note: All time-series are decadal averages plotted at the centre of the decade.

Source: IPCC (2015: 49).

The IPCC's 2018 *Special Report* compared the impact of global warming of 1.5°C with that of 2°C above pre-industrial levels, noting that human activity has already produced warming of between 0.8°C and 1.2°C, i.e., approximately 1°C. On present trends, at 0.2°C per decade, based on previous and current emissions, 1.5°C of warming will be reached sometime between 2030 and 2052 (IPCC 2019: 6). Even if all emissions

stopped immediately, warming would continue on account of past greenhouse gas emissions, but this would not reach the 1.5°C threshold.

As in the Fifth Assessment (2015), the IPCC argued that the most damaging effects of global warming could be averted if the temperature rise can be kept as close to 1.5°C as possible. All of the potentially deleterious effects of rising temperatures listed above would be worse and more difficult to reverse if 2°C is reached. To prevent that happening would require a much more systematic, wide-ranging global programme to reduce emissions alongside adaptive measures. In particular, global net emissions of CO_2 would have to be reduced to 'near zero' by 2050. The report acknowledges that achieving this goal will require 'rapid and far-reaching transitions in energy, land, urban and infrastructure (including transport and buildings) and industrial systems' that are 'unprecedented in terms of scale, but not necessarily in terms of speed' (IPCC 2019: 17).

Net zero has become the slogan of XR and other environmental groups as they try to push governments to go faster in reducing carbon emissions, and much progress has been made in numerous countries to shift to renewable forms of energy and to move away from fossil-fuel-based transport systems. Yet, despite this, the scale of the task ahead is highlighted by reports that, after levelling off between 2014 and 2016, global CO_2 emissions began to rise again, by 1.6 per cent in 2017 and 2.7 per cent in 2018, ending the year at an all-time high. These rises have been attributed to oil and gas use continuing in many countries, the increasing use of coal in China (by 4.5 per cent) and India (by 7.1 per cent) (countries with very large populations), and US emissions rising by around 2.5 per cent (Figueres et al. 2018). What we can see from this brief sketch is that, without concerted *global* action involving all of the major polluting nations, global net zero CO_2 by 2050 will not be achieved.

The negative impact of global warming will be distributed unevenly, with already disadvantaged people and communities around the world bearing the brunt of environmental change. As we will see later, this is one reason why campaigners argue for 'sustainable development',

which foregrounds tackling global inequality as the key to reducing emissions.

Questioning the science

Since its creation in 1988, the IPCC has made it increasingly clear that global warming is largely the result of anthropogenic causes such as industrial pollution, vehicle emissions, deforestation and the burning of fossil fuels, all of which release greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Although the evidence base is large, diverse and consistent, there are still contentious debates around the thesis and its implications which bring the consensus view into conflict with a small number of 'climate change sceptics'.

The IPCC (2015: 2) says that 'Warming of the climate is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia.' Yet some question the evidence that global warming is actually occurring at all. Lord (Nigel) Lawson (2009: 1), former energy secretary and chancellor in the UK government, maintains that global warming is 'the latest scare' in a series that includes overpopulation and total resource depletion. Lawson argues that there was a 'mild warming' in the last quarter of the twentieth century, but this has been followed by a 'lull' in the twenty-first century when warming has apparently 'stopped'. The sceptical charge here is that climate scientists fail to deal adequately with contrary evidence and either ignore it or cherry-pick their evidence. Yet in 2011, the government's chief scientific adviser, Sir John Beddington, engaged in an exchange of letters with Lawson, arguing that his book showed little grasp of climate science, that short-term temperature trends are not meaningful in the context of long-term global warming, and that the scientific evidence from multiple sources clearly showed that 'the risks are real' (Boffey 2011).

Second, some sceptics argue there is good evidence that global warming *is* real but deny an anthropogenic cause. For this strand, global warming is an entirely natural phenomenon, probably related to the fluctuating activity of the sun. They also claim that CO_2 is not a significant greenhouse gas. As solar activity fluctuates, so does the Earth's climate, and this explains the current warming trend. The

majority scientific view is that solar activity does affect surface temperature, but there is no evidence of a positive trend in solar activity since the 1960s that could have produced the present global warming. CO_2 is certainly not the *only* greenhouse gas, but it does remain in the atmosphere for many decades and even centuries, which leads to a steady accumulation over time from industrial activity. It is this, say the majority, which mainly accounts for global warming.

Third, even if we accept that global warming *is* real and *is* partly explained by industrialization, some argue that the predicted consequences are highly speculative at best and grossly exaggerated at worst. Computer modelling of the kind used by the IPCC is notoriously unreliable, especially when extrapolating current trends far into the future, and suggestions of a 6°C rise by 2100 amount to scaremongering. Politically, economically and socially, our efforts would be better directed at tackling other more urgent social problems, such as poverty in developing countries, rather than wasting valuable resources on an uncertain 'problem' (Lomborg 2001).

Although some forecasts at the extreme end of climate science do suggest an increase of 6°C is possible by 2100, this assumes no change in the policies of governments aimed at reducing carbon emissions – already an outdated assumption. We must bear in mind that there are many uncertainties in climate forecasting, including cloud feedback, changing ice-sheet flows in Antarctica and Greenland, landuse change, technological developments, the impact of aerosols, the extent of behavioural changes and a lack of data in some regions, which hinder accurate modelling.

Given the global situation, it is not possible to rule out completely the more radical and devastating effects of global warming this century. Nevertheless, the history of environmental politics in the twentieth century is littered with failed predictions of global disaster and catastrophic societal collapse, so it makes sense for social scientists to work with the best available scientific research, which is currently the ongoing IPCC programme. It is also correct that computer modelling can conflict with real-world evidence, but the IPCC climate models are complex and built on evidence gathered from many sources around the world. The Fourth Assessment Report noted that, since 1990, IPCC

forecast values have averaged 0.15 to 0.3°C increase per decade, which compares favourably with the observed increase between 1990 and 2005 of 0.2°C per decade. Such evidence suggests that the IPCC modelling is, in fact, the most accurate we have.

The 'ClimateGate' affair, discussed in ['Using your sociological imagination' 5.2](#), has been a salutary experience, not just for climate scientists, but for the academic community as a whole. In an increasingly global academic environment, which operates within societies where easy access to the internet and ideals of freedom of information combine to create expectations of open access to information and data, scientific practice often seems to be catching up. It is certainly not unusual for groups of scientists to guard jealously their raw data in order to protect their own knowledge claims, and, although it is common to speak of a 'scientific community', it is important to remember that scientific work, like all other spheres of social life, is highly competitive. For the foreseeable future at least, it is likely that an uneasy tension between established scientific practice and the emerging culture of open access to information will continue.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

5.2 ClimateGate: a cautionary tale

Climate change science was called into question in 2009, when the Climatic Research Unit at the University of East Anglia in the UK had its email system hacked and around 1,000 emails, including exchanges between members of the unit and colleagues around the world, were published on the worldwide web – an affair now known as 'ClimateGate'.

In some of these emails, the director, Professor Phil Jones, referred to performing 'a trick' with climate data and talked of 'hiding the decline' in temperature for one data series. He also admitted refusing repeated requests to share data with critics and asking a colleague to delete all emails relating to the IPCC's Fourth Assessment. Jones later argued that the email comments were taken out of context; the 'trick' was simply finding a creative way of joining two datasets, while 'hiding the decline' meant correcting a false impression in one dataset by making a composite set that also included instrumental data (BBC 2010).

Sceptics see this episode as supportive of their case that many climate scientists, whose careers and reputations have become intertwined with proving anthropogenic global warming, are prepared to sacrifice key scientific principles of openness and peer review in order to protect themselves and their 'unproven' thesis. Then, in 2010, after criticism from glaciologists, the vicechair of the IPCC admitted that a claim in the 2007 report that Himalayan glaciers 'could disappear by 2035' was wrong. Mistakes such as this, say sceptics, raise the issue of how many other IPCC predictions are incorrect, calling the existence of global warming into question.

'ClimateGate' was the subject of three independent inquiries: a parliamentary inquiry, a university inquiry into eleven key scientific papers, and a university-commissioned inquiry led by a senior civil servant, Sir Muir Russell, into the hacked and leaked email

exchanges. All three found no evidence of scientific malpractice, falsification of data or attempts to subvert the peer review process. However, the Russell Review (Russell 2010: 10–11) did criticize the unit for being unhelpful and defensive when requests for data were made under the Freedom of Information (FoI) Act. It also criticized the university and the unit for failing to appreciate the statutory requirements of the FoI Act and the potential damage that could be caused to climate science research and the university itself by withholding data. A separate review of the IPCC's main forecasts, commissioned by the Dutch government in 2010, found no errors that might call into question the finding that anthropogenic climate change was occurring.

THINKING CRITICALLY

If the evidence of global warming is compelling, why should this unit be wary of giving out information and withhold some of its data? What impact might hacking of this kind have on the practice of climate science?

Responding to global warming

The industrial countries currently produce far more greenhouse gases than the developing world, and China has overtaken the USA and emits more carbon dioxide than any other single country. However, emissions from the developing world are increasing, particularly in countries undergoing rapid industrialization, and are expected to be roughly equal to those of industrialized countries sometime around 2035. Taking population size into account, and looking at emissions per capita, China and India currently produce lower levels than the USA, Europe, the Russian Federation and Japan, which shows why some developing countries see their own 'survival' emissions as far less damaging than the 'luxury' emissions of the already rich countries.

There is also a disjunction between the widespread acceptance of global warming and people being prepared to change their routines to help tackle it. Giddens (2011: 2) calls this (unsurprisingly) 'the Giddens

Paradox'. This states that, as people experience no clearly tangible effects of the dangers of unchecked global warming in their everyday lives, they will not change their environmentally damaging actions. Car dependency is a clear example of this. Yet, if they wait until global warming does impact on their lives, it will be too late to do anything about it. Before that happens, ways have to be found to '[embed] it in our institutions and in the everyday concerns of citizens' (ibid.: 3).

Without the positive involvement of the critical mass of individual citizens, it seems unlikely that government policies alone will succeed. But a coordinated global approach to cutting greenhouse gas emissions is made more difficult in the context of uneven economic development at the national level, which produces as much disagreement as agreement on how to coordinate reductions and adaptive measures.

The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change was created in 1997 in Kyoto, Japan, where agreement was reached to cut emissions significantly by 2012 in order to stabilize and eventually reduce greenhouse gas levels in the atmosphere. Targets ranged from an average 8 per cent cut for most of Europe to a maximum 10 per cent increase for Iceland and an 8 per cent increase for Australia. The USA originally committed itself to a 7 per cent cut but has never ratified the protocol. The Kyoto Protocol took 1990 greenhouse emission levels as its starting point. However, this was seen in the Global South as favouring the industrialized countries, both failing to take into account the latter's 'historical responsibility' for creating global warming and, hence, avoiding attributing blame. It is also unclear exactly when developing countries will be asked to reduce their emissions or by how much. Will it allow for the inevitably higher emissions levels as their economic development catches up with that of the industrialized world? If it does not, then it may be seen as unfair and unworkable (Najam et al. 2003).

Following acrimonious disagreements and failure to secure a binding agreement at the Copenhagen talks in 2009, the Cancun meeting in 2010 was widely seen as marking progress: 190 countries agreed to bring the voluntary targets set out in Copenhagen into the process, to accept the goal of limiting the global temperature rise to less than 2°C, but to strive for 1.5°C. They also agreed to set up a green climate fund

as part of a US$100 billion commitment to help developing countries move forward in non-polluting ways. The overall agreement is legally binding, but specific aspects such as pledges by individual nation-states to reduce emissions are not (Goldenberg et al. 2015).

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In 2015, a new Paris Agreement (COP24 – the 24th 'conference of parties'), involving 196 countries, was widely hailed as an important step forward. This agreement committed countries to reduce greenhouse gases (particularly CO_2) to keep global warming below 2ºC, preferably closer to 1.5ºC, by 2050. Yet in 2017 the new US president, Donald Trump (a global warming sceptic), announced that the USA would no longer participate in the agreement and would withdraw as soon as possible. Having promised to restart the coal industry, Trump saw the Paris targets as a threat to the US economy. This perceived choice between promoting economic growth *or* tackling global

environmental problems is widely viewed today as wrong-headed. As we shall see later, it is possible to envisage and plan for ecological modernization and economic growth based on 'greening' the industrial economy, shifting away from polluting industries towards renewable technologies. Reshaping economies in this way is often referred to as the 'green industrial revolution' or the 'green new deal'.

However, at the 2019 COP 25 conference in Madrid, broad agreement could not be reached on taking the Paris agreement forward to more ambitious national targets. And even if existing commitments on emissions reductions were actually met, global greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 would still be 38 per cent above what is needed to restrict warming to the agreed 1.5ºC target. The UN secretary general, António Guterres, said that an important opportunity to adopt a more ambitious programme of action had, once again, been missed (Carbon Brief 2019).

As with other manufactured risks, no one can be absolutely certain what the effects of global warming will be. Would a 'high' emissions scenario truly result in widespread natural disasters? Will stabilizing the level of carbon dioxide emissions protect most people from the negative effects of climate change? We cannot answer these questions with any certainty, but international scientific collaboration and political processes do seem to offer the most viable ways of dealing with the problem, which is, after all, a global one. In addition, the underlying anthropogenic causes of global warming require an understanding not just of the basic environmental science but also of social processes.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> 'People in the developed world are responsible for causing global warming and they should accept a lower standard of living to rapidly reduce greenhouse gas emissions.' Which aspects of modern life should bear the brunt of the necessary radical changes?

Air and water pollution

Air pollution

It is possible to make a distinction between two types of air pollution: 'outdoor pollution', produced mainly by industrial pollutants and automobile emissions, and 'indoor pollution', which is caused by burning fuels in the home for heating and cooking. Traditionally, air pollution has been seen as a problem that afflicts mainly the industrialized countries as a result of mass production and large numbers of motorized vehicles. However, in recent years attention has been drawn to the dangers of 'indoor pollution' in the developing world, where many of the fuels used, such as wood and dung, are not as clean-burning as modern fuels such as kerosene and propane.

Until the middle of the twentieth century, air pollution in many countries was caused primarily by the widespread burning of coal, a fossil fuel which emits sulphur dioxide and thick black smoke into the atmosphere. In many Eastern European countries and in the developing world, the practice remains widespread today. In the UK coal was used extensively to heat homes and power industry, but in 1956 the Clean Air Act was passed to regulate smoke pollution and smog (a mixture of smoke and fog). Smokeless fuels, such as kerosene, propane and natural gas, were promoted as alternatives and are now more widely used. In 2019 the government updated the Act by announcing a new Clean Air Strategy, which included a pledge to end the sale of petrol and diesel cars and vans by 2040 and to ban the most polluting forms of coal and wood used in open fires and stoves (Defra 2019a).

Since the 1960s the main source of air pollution has been the growing number of motor vehicles. In 2015, in the twenty-eight countries of the European Union, transport was responsible for almost one-quarter of greenhouse gases, and 72 per cent of these came from road transport (European Commission 2015a; see [figure 5.2](#)). Road transport emissions are particularly harmful because they enter the environment at a much lower level than emissions from tall industrial chimneys. As a result, cities have long been among the most polluted environments for pedestrians and workers. For instance, nitrogen oxides from diesel cars produce ozone and very fine particulate matter which impacts on human health. The UK government says that airborne nitrogen oxides lead to the premature deaths of some 23,500 citizens every year, and

the European Environment Agency estimates that around 430,000 people across Europe died from the same causes in 2012 (Coghlan 2015).

Cars account for some 80 per cent of road journeys in Europe and make a major contribution to carbon emissions. A single occupancy car journey can produce more carbon per passenger, per kilometre travelled, than fully loaded short- or long-haul flights (Beggs 2009: 77–8). For this reason, attempts to reduce air pollution have focused on the use of low-emission travel alternatives such as passenger trains, high-occupancy buses and the sharing of car journeys. Since 2008, greenhouse gases from road vehicles in the EU and elsewhere have started to fall due to high oil prices and the increasing efficiency of private cars (European Commission 2015a). Yet stricter pollution targets do not, in themselves, guarantee reductions in real-world vehicle emissions, as a major scandal from 2015 demonstrates.

In the early twenty-first century, many car manufacturers invested heavily in less polluting, 'clean diesel' cars, claiming that their emission of nitrogen oxide pollutants and CO_2 were now low enough to pass the strictest emissions tests. The car-maker Volkswagen made a determined attempt to sell their new diesels into the American market, where they successfully passed the US government's stringent tests. But in 2015 the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) (which had raised concerns in 2014) found that Volkswagen cars had higher emissions 'on the road' than in the company's laboratory tests. Even worse, the EPA found factory-fitted software within the cars – a 'defeat device' – which recognized the signs of emissions testing – a stationary vehicle, static steering, air pressure level, and so on – and put the car into an alternative mode which temporarily lowered emissions. Out on the road, the EPA found that the new diesels emitted up to forty times more nitrogen oxide pollutants than US regulations allowed.

EU GHG emissions from transport by mode

Road Transport (71.9%) ■
Total Civil Aviation (12.8) ■
Total Navigation (13.9%) ■
Other (0.8%) ■
Railways (0.6%) ■

EU GHG emissions by sector

■ Industry (17.7%)
■ Transport (24.3%)
■ Energy industries (29.2%)
■ Residential and Commercial (12.5%)
■ Agriculture (11.3%)
■ Other (5.0%)
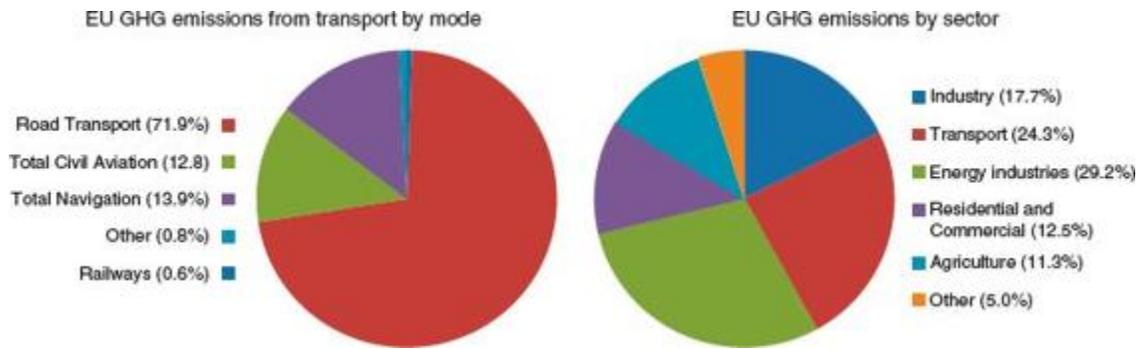
Figure 5.2 EU28 greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) by mode of transport and sector, 2012

Source: European Commission (2015a).

Volkswagen admitted trying to cheat the testing regime and acknowledged that around 11 million cars were fitted with the device, 8 million of them in Europe. For the company, emissions testing was merely an obstacle to commercial success, not a means of ensuring better air quality for all. Diesel models from numerous other car-makers, including Nissan, Volvo, Renault, Citroen and Chrysler, were subsequently found to produce more than ten times more nitrous oxide emissions on the road than were claimed by the manufacturers. In 2018, Audi admitted marketing some of its cars with a similar, 'impermissible software function' (BBC News 2018e). Large fines were imposed on the companies concerned, and a more realistic testing regime was introduced. The scandal alerts us to the tension that exists between capitalist corporations' constant pursuit of new markets and profits and environmental regulatory regimes seeking to reduce pollution and protect human health.

See chapter 22, `Crime and Deviance', for a discussion of corporate criminality.

Water pollution

Although water is one of the most valuable and essential natural resources, for many years waste products – both human and manufactured – were dumped directly into rivers and oceans with barely a second thought. For instance, in the summer of 1858, the River Thames in London emitted a stench so foul it brought the city to a standstill, forcing politicians to act. Only in the past sixty years or so have concerted efforts been made in many countries to protect the quality of water, to conserve fish stocks and the wildlife that depend on it, and to ensure access to clean water for the global human population.

Water pollution can be understood as contamination of the water supply by toxic chemicals and minerals, pesticides, or untreated sewage, and it poses the greatest threat to people in the developing world. Sanitation systems are underdeveloped in many of the world's poorest countries, and human waste products are often emptied directly into streams, rivers and lakes. More recently, serious concerns have been raised about the levels of plastic waste that have been discovered in the world's oceans and coastal regions, much of it being 'singleuse' plastics such as drinks bottles, carrier bags and packaging. Regardless of increasing levels of concern, water pollution remains a serious problem in many parts of the world.

Much progress has been made to improve access to safe drinking water. During the 1990s, nearly 1 billion people gained access to safe water and the same number to sanitation, though ensuring safe water supplies remains a problem, particularly in some parts of Africa, where people drink from unprotected wells and springs along with surface

water ([figure 5.3](#)). The problem may worsen as water supplies in some developing countries are privatized, raising the cost for customers, while the effects of global warming also produce more regular droughts.

One of the 'Millennium Development Goals' set by the United Nations in 2000 was to 'reduce by half the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water' by 2015. This target was met well ahead of schedule in 2010. By 2015, 91 per cent of the world population had access to improved drinking water sources, and 2.6 billion people had gained such access since 1990. However, in the same year, the Caucasus region, Central Asia, Northern Africa, Oceania and sub-Saharan Africa missed their MDG targets, and some 663 million people – mainly in rural areas – still did not have access to improved sources of safe water (UNICEF/WHO 2015: 4). Many of the least developed countries store around 4 per cent of their annual renewable water flow compared with the 70 to 90 per cent stored in developed countries (UNESCO 2009).

Global society 5.2 Susan Freinkel on our love–hate affair with plastic

Plastic makes up only about 10 percent of all the garbage the world produces, yet unlike most other trash, it is stubbornly persistent. As a result, beach surveys around the world consistently show that 60 to 80 percent of the debris that collects on the shore is plastic. Every year, the Ocean Conservancy sponsors an international beach-cleanup day in which more than a hundred countries now take part…. Whether they're working a beach in Chile, France, or China, volunteers inevitably come across the same stuff: plastic bottles, cutlery, plates, and cups; straws and stirrers, fast-food wrappers, and packaging. Smoking-related items are among the most common. Indeed, cigarette butts – each made up of thousands of fibers of the semisynthetic polymer cellulose acetate – top every list…. For all the dangers posed by floating bags, castaway lighters, and abandoned nets, the most profound and insidious threat may well be the trillions upon trillions of tiny pieces of plastic speckled across the world's beaches and scattered through its oceans. These itsy bits, collectively known as microdebris, were scarcely on experts' radar until recently…. The rise in microdebris is partly due to rising plastics production, which leads to an increase in pellets that can get into the environment: they're now thought to constitute about 10 percent of all ocean debris. It's also due to the growing use of teensy plastic beads as scrubbers in household and cosmetic cleaning products and for blasting dirt off ships…. But the main source of microdebris is likely macrodebris: the larger pieces of junked plastic that have been fragmented by the sun and waves. Increasingly, experts fear that these bits are just as dangerous to marine wildlife as the lethal necklaces of packing straps and nylon netting that can choke seals and sharks, and even whales.

Source: Extracts from Freinkel (2011: 127–8 and 134–5).

Pollution of the oceans by a variety of plastic items has only recently come to be seen as a potentially serious environmental problem.
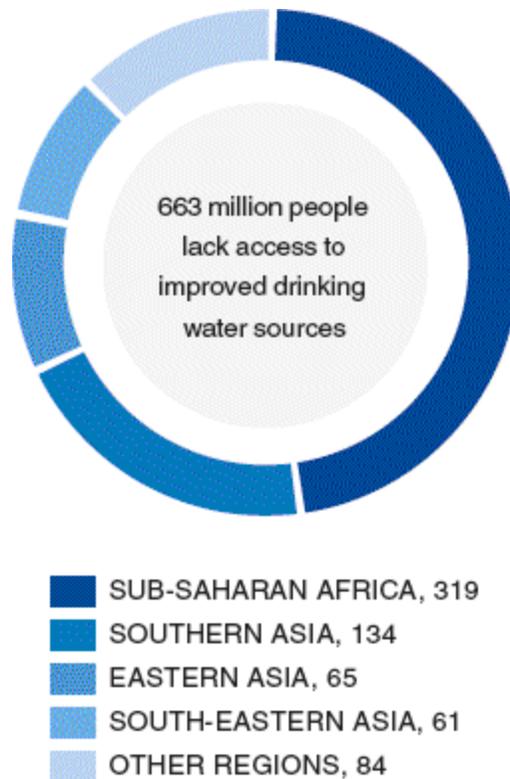
Figure 5.3 Population without access to improved water sources, by region, 2015

Source: UNICEF/WHO (2015: 7).

Progress on sanitation has been slower. The MDG target was for 77 per cent of the global population to be using improved facilities by 2015, but only 68 per cent did so. This represents around 700 million people fewer than the target. Some 2.4 billion people did not have access to improved sanitation; of these, seven out of ten lived in rural areas, as did nine out of ten of those still practising open defecation (UNICEF/WHO 2015: 5). Clearly the MDG targets have proved to be an effective tool for encouraging and measuring progress on the provision of safe water and effective sanitation, but there remains much to be done. As a result, the MDGs were replaced in 2012 with a new set of seventeen interlinked Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), covering poverty reduction, gender equality, climate action, sustainable cities, clean energy, and much more.

Solid waste and recycling

There are very few things we can buy without packaging and, though there are clear benefits, in terms of displaying goods attractively and guaranteeing the safety of products, there are major drawbacks too.

Waste generation is closely tied to the relative prosperity of countries. Poland, Hungary and Slovenia, for example – countries that quite recently moved towards the model of Western capitalism and consumer culture – generate less than half the waste per capita of the USA, Denmark and Australia. However, the more established high-consumption societies do now manage their waste more effectively. As figure 5.4 shows, countries such as Germany, Norway and Ireland are steadily reducing the proportion of waste that ends up in landfill. The European Union aims to become a 'recycling society', and there is a move to recycle or compost waste (50 per cent of all municipal waste in the European economic area by 2020) as well as to reduce the amount of packaging used for products at the point of production (European Environment Agency 2013).

The industrialized societies are often called 'throw-away societies' because the volume of items discarded as a matter of course is so large. In most countries of the industrialized world, waste collection services are almost universal, but it is increasingly difficult to dispose of the enormous amounts of waste. Landfill sites are becoming full and many urban areas have run out of disposal room. In Scotland, for example, around 90 per cent of household waste was still going to landfill sites in 2006, and the Scottish Environment Protection Agency reported that household waste was growing at 2 per cent per annum.
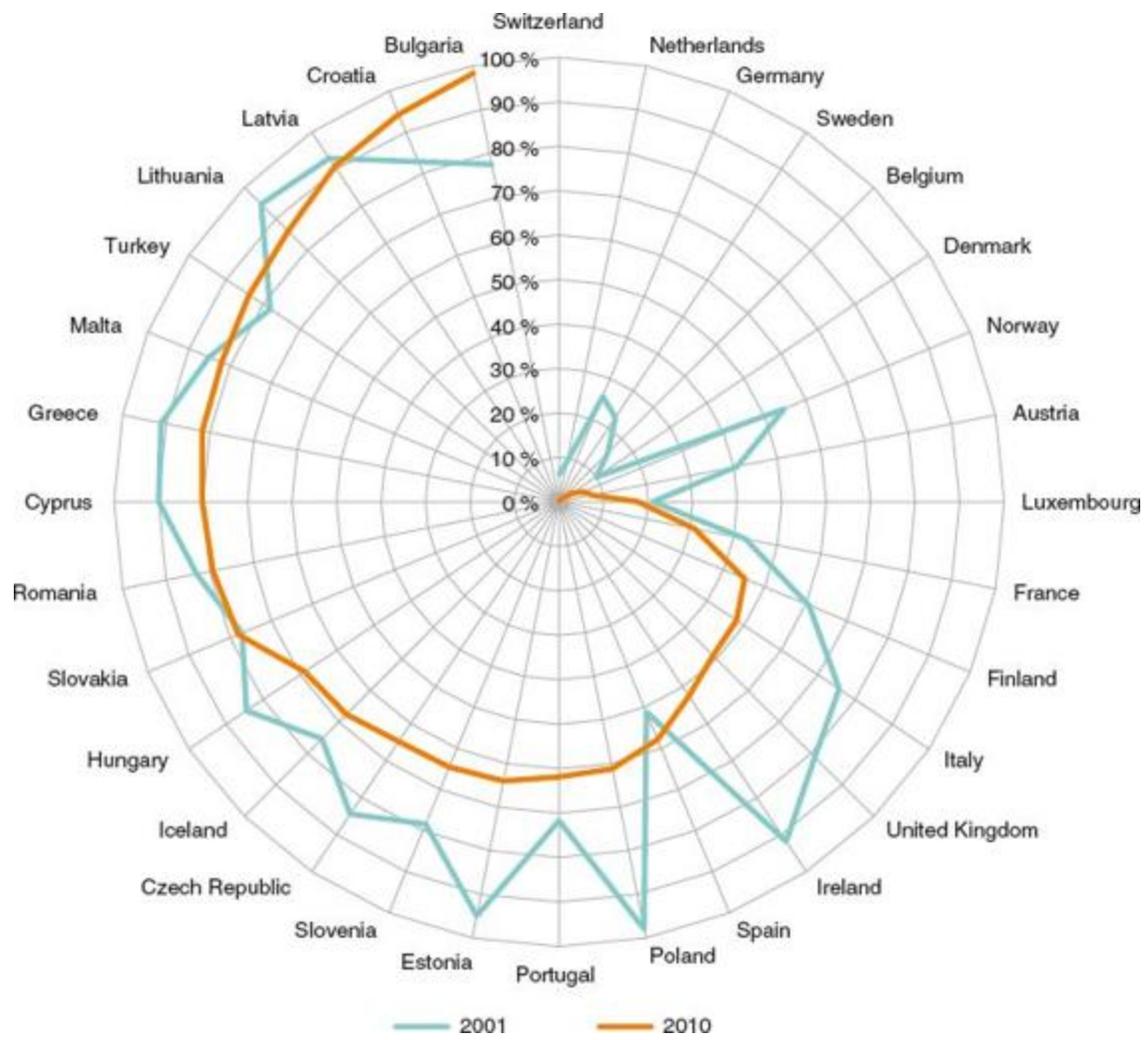
Figure 5.4 Proportion of municipal waste going to landfill, by European economic area country, 2001 and 2010

Source: European Environment Agency (2013: 21).

The international trade in waste led to the export of plastic waste to China for recycling, where waste was often sorted by hand in poorly regulated working environments that produced environmental degradation. However, in 2018 China banned the import of plastics and other solid wastes for recycling, forcing national governments to look for alternative ways of dealing with their material waste. India and Malaysia followed, banning the importation of solid plastic waste in 2019, and Thailand announced a similar ban from 2021 (Lee 2019).

UK government statistics show that recycling rates increased from 40.4 per cent in 2010 to 45.7 per cent by 2017. Over the same period, the

proportion of biodegradable waste going to landfill also fell, from 36 to 21 per cent (Defra 2019b). So, although the amount of household waste has been increasing, more of this is recycled year on year (Defra 2016). Although the amount of household waste recycled may still seem low in comparison with the overall amount produced, a large proportion of what is thrown away cannot be easily reprocessed or reused. Many plastics employed in food packaging simply become unusable waste and have to be buried in refuse tips, where they may remain for centuries. Recycling is becoming a huge industry around the world, but there is still a long way to go to transform the world's 'throw-away societies'.

Recycling of household waste has increased as it has become built into the routines of everyday life.

In the developing world, the biggest problem with domestic waste is the *lack* of refuse collection services. It has been estimated that 20 to 50 per cent of domestic waste in the developing world goes uncollected. Poorly managed waste systems mean that refuse piles up in the streets, contributing to the spread of disease. Over time it is very likely that the developing world will have to deal with problems of waste disposal that are even more acute than those in industrialized countries. This is because, as societies become richer, there is a gradual shift from organic waste, such as food remains, to plastic and synthetic materials, such as packaging, which take much longer to decompose.

Food shortages and biotechnology

In some of the world's most densely populated areas, people are highly dependent on staple food crops – such as rice – stocks of which are dwindling. Global warming may increase desertification and lead to poor harvests, which has resulted in fears that food shortages may become more widespread. As a result, many worry that present farming techniques will not be able to produce rice yields sufficient to support the growing population. As with many environmental challenges, the threat of famine is not evenly distributed. The industrialized countries have extensive surpluses of grain, but, in the poorer countries, shortfalls are likely to become a chronic problem.

One UK report, based on two years of research into the future of food supplies and farming, argued that the present global food system is not sustainable and cannot end the problem of hunger (Foresight 2011). As the global population grows, from 7 billion to over 8 billion by 2030 and 9 billion by 2050, competition for water, land and energy will intensify and global warming will increase the pressure on food production systems. The combination of these factors constitutes a major threat which demands urgent action. Piecemeal changes will not solve the problem, nor will attempts to achieve national food self-sufficiency. The report argues for a coordinated policy approach and action on four fronts: more food needs to be produced sustainably, demand for resource-intensive foods must be contained, waste in all areas of the food system should be minimized, and political and

economic governance of the food system needs to be improved (ibid.: 12–13).

The Foresight report also argues that no policy options or technologies should be closed off in the quest for a sustainable food system, and some scientists and politicians see one key to averting a future food crisis may be advances in biotechnology. By manipulating the genetic composition of basic crops, it is possible to boost a plant's rate of photosynthesis to produce bigger yields. This process is known as genetic modification, and plants produced this way are called [genetically modified organisms](#) (GMOs). Scientists have produced GMOs with higher than normal vitamin content, for example, while other genetically modified crops are resistant to commonly used agricultural herbicides that can be used to kill the weeds around them, as well as insects and fungal and viral pests. Food products that are made from, or contain traces of, GMOs are known as GM foods, and GM crops are sometimes called 'transgenic' crops.

GM crops are different from anything that has existed before, because they involve transplanting genes between different species. This is a much more radical intervention than older methods of cross-breeding. GMOs are produced by techniques of gene splicing that can be used to transplant genes between animals as well as plants. For instance, in some experiments, human genes have been introduced into farm animals, such as pigs, with a view eventually to providing replacement parts for human transplants. Human genes have even been spliced into plants, although the GM crops that have been marketed so far do not involve this kind of radical bioengineering.

Scientists claim that a GM strain of 'superrice' could boost rice yields by as much as 35 per cent. Another strain, called 'golden rice' – which contains added amounts of vitamin A – could reduce vitamin A deficiency in more than 120 million children worldwide. You might think that such advances in biotechnology would be welcomed enthusiastically, but, in fact, genetic modification has become one of the most controversial issues of our age. For many people, it highlights the fine line that exists between the benefits of technology and the risks of environmental damage.

The GM food controversy

The intense debate on GM foods began in the mid-1990s, when the first shipment of GM soya beans from the USA arrived in Europe before EU labelling rules had been put in place (Horlick-Jones et al. 2009: 4). Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth campaigned against GM, and pressure built on supermarkets in Europe not to stock GM foods. Concern was especially widespread in Europe (Toke 2004).

The American company Monsanto was the leader in developing GM technology. Monsanto bought seed companies, sold off its chemical division and devoted much of its energy to bringing the new crops to market. Its chief executive launched a huge advertising campaign in America promoting the benefits of GM crops to farmers and consumers. Monsanto's campaign claimed that GM crops could help feed the world's poor and reduce the use of chemical pollutants, especially the chemicals used in pesticides and herbicides. It is claimed that biotechnology will allow farmers to grow better-quality crops with higher yields, while at the same time sustaining and protecting the environment. However, since GM crops are essentially novel, no one can be certain about what their effects will be once they are introduced into the environment, and many consumer groups became concerned about the potential risks involved.

Many members of the British public registered their opposition to GM crops. A typical 2003 survey showed that 59 per cent of the UK population strongly agreed that genetically modified foods should be banned (ONS 2005). Campaigners engaged in 'direct actions', pulling GM crops out of the ground at official trial sites across the country. Similar responses occurred in a range of other European countries. In the UK, seven out of the eight major supermarket chains changed their policy on GM foods. Five imposed a complete ban on GM ingredients in their own-brand products, which is still in place, and all of them insisted on better labelling. Two large companies, Unilever and Nestlé, announced they would withdraw their acceptance of genetically modified foodstuffs. Some farmers in the USA who had been engaged in the large-scale cultivation of GM crops changed back to conventional crop production.

Figure 5.5 Distribution of biotech crops in developing and industrial countries in 2017

Source: ISAAA (2017).

The protests of environmentalists and consumer groups had a major impact on the fate of Monsanto, causing a serious decline in its share value. Matsuura (2004) argues that, in the early days, the biotechnology industry made two mistakes: first it tried to ignore public concerns and then, when GM is also an emotional issue, it attempted to address them through purely rational arguments. The CEO appeared on television to admit his company had made major mistakes and 'irritated and antagonized more people than we have persuaded'. It was an extraordinary turnaround, and Monsanto was forced to drop one of its most controversial plans – the idea of using a gene called 'the terminator'. This gene would have ensured that seeds which Monsanto sold to farmers would be sterile after one generation. Critics claimed Monsanto was trying to lure farmers into a form of 'bioslavery'.

The issue of GM crops highlights the point that environmental issues always involve complex combinations of the natural and the social. In May 2000, the British government admitted that thousands of acres of conventional oilseed rape planted by farmers had been 'contaminated', as GM crops pollinated those nearby. German research published just weeks later claimed that a gene commonly used to modify oilseed rape had jumped the species barrier into bees. Such findings have been taken by environmental activists as supportive of their advocacy of a precautionary principle. This proposes that, where there is sufficient doubt about the possible risks of new technologies, it is up to producers to prove they will not cause harm before they are approved for use. Critics argue that this principle would stifle innovation and is historically naïve, as many unproven technologies have actually had major benefits that would have been lost.

Despite the concerns of environmentalists, the amount of land given over to growing GM crops globally continues to increase, particularly in developing countries, where the laws restricting GM crops are generally less strict ([figure 5.5](#)). By 2010 the total global planting area for transgenic crops reached 1 billion hectares (Peng 2011), and in 2017 some 17 million farmers in twenty-four countries were growing GM crops (ISAAA 2017).

The GM controversy is an excellent example of a '[manufactured risk](#)' – that is, an apparently 'natural' issue which actually arises from human intervention. We will discuss ideas of risk in relation to the environment later in the chapter, but next we explore some key sociological theories that highlight society–environment relations.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> How realistic is the 'precautionary principle' – that we should always err on the side of caution with untested new technologies? What real-world examples of unproven technologies are there which call this principle into question?

The environment in sociological theory

Natural scientists have been at the forefront of debates on environmental issues. As the examples above of pollution, genetic modification and global warming show, environmental issues are different from most sociological subjects because they involve getting to grips with *natural scientific* research and evidence. However, the hybrid character of environmental issues means that natural scientists can never have a monopoly on them. Our brief introduction to the problem of global warming is the most striking example of this.

The IPCC scientists acknowledge that global warming is largely the product of human activities – industrialization, urbanization and globalization processes, for example – and the experts in these areas are sociologists and other *social* scientists, such as political scientists, human geographers and all of those studying development and international relations (Urry 2011). If environmental problems are to be successfully understood and tackled, then social and natural scientists will have to try to understand each other rather better than they have done so far.

The rest of this section will explore some of the main sociological theories linking social development with environmental damage, along with some of the major approaches to solving global environmental problems.

Living in the global 'risk society'

Humans have always had to face risks of one kind or another, but today's risks are qualitatively different from those that came in earlier times. Until quite recently, human societies were threatened by external risk – dangers such as drought, earthquakes, famines and storms that spring from the natural world and are unrelated to the actions of humans. Earthquakes and related tsunamis show that external risks of this kind will continue, as planet Earth is characterized by many active, natural processes. However, we are also increasingly confronted by

various types of manufactured risk that are created by the impact of our own knowledge and technology on the natural world.

Debates on genetically modified foods and global warming have presented individuals with new choices and challenges in their everyday lives. Because there are no definitive answers as to the consequences of such risks, each individual is forced to make decisions about which risks they are prepared to take. Should we use food and raw materials if their production or consumption has a negative impact on our health and the natural environment? Even seemingly simple decisions about what to eat are made in the context of conflicting information and opinions about the product's relative merits and drawbacks.

Ulrich Beck (1992, 1999, 2009) wrote extensively about risk and globalization. As technological change progresses more rapidly, producing new forms of risk, we must constantly respond and adjust to the changes. Risks today involve a series of interrelated changes in contemporary social life: shifting employment patterns, heightened job insecurity, the declining influence of tradition and custom on self-identity, the erosion of traditional family patterns and the democratization of personal relationships. Because personal futures are much less fixed than in the past, decisions of all kinds present risks for individuals. Getting married, for example, is a more risky course today than it was when marriage was a lifelong commitment. Decisions about educational qualifications and career paths can also feel risky: it is difficult to predict what skills will be valuable in an economy that changes as rapidly as ours. ‘Classic studies’ 5.1 explores Beck's arguments, specifically in relation to environmental risks.

Beck's argument that there is a growing consciousness of manufactured risks, especially those related to society–environment relations, is amply illustrated by the large-scale environmental protests and campaigns of the last decade or so. For example, the rise of Extinction Rebellion and the international school climate strikes have tended to focus on global warming and biodiversity loss, both of which are linked to human activities. Although many environmental campaigns aim to shift government policy, they have also raised the question of the long-term sustainability of the high-consumption lifestyles enjoyed in the

Global North. Next, we look at the [consumer societies](#) and why changing consumer behaviour may offer a way of raising awareness of and reducing human impact on the environment.

[Classic studies 5.1](#) Ulrich Beck and the global risk society

The research problem

This chapter has explored some of the environmental consequences of industrialization and the increasingly global human footprint. Taking a long-term view, we can see that the spread of industrialization produces more widespread and potentially serious side effects in the form of environmental risks. But is modern life really more risky, or are we just more 'risk aware'? Are we worrying unnecessarily about environmental problems? The German sociologist Ulrich Beck (1944–2015) has been the foremost sociological theorist of risk, which he understood as much more significant than sociologists previously thought.

Beck's explanation

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the politics of modern societies was dominated by a major conflict of interest between workers and employers – in Marx's terms, between the non-owning working class and the propertyowning capitalist class. The conflict centred on issues of wealth distribution as trade unions and labour parties sought a more equal distribution of the socially produced wealth. Such struggles still continue, of course. But Ulrich Beck (1992, 2002, 2009) argues that this distributional conflict is losing its significance as environmental risks rise to prominence. He says that more people are beginning to realize that their fight for a share of the 'wealth cake' is futile if the cake itself is being poisoned as a result of pollution and environmental damage (Beck 2002: 128). Beck argues that:

> the knowledge is spreading that the sources of wealth are 'polluted' by growing 'hazardous side effects'. This is not at all new, but it has remained unnoticed for a long time in the efforts to overcome poverty.... To put it differently, in the risk society the unknown and unintended consequences come to be a dominant force in history and society. (1992: 20–1)

Industrial societies are slowly dissolving as environmental problems build up; this is an unintended consequence of the rush for economic growth and material prosperity. Beck (1999) argues that we are, in effect, moving into a 'world risk society' – a new type of society in which risk consciousness and risk avoidance are becoming central features – because environmental pollution does not respect national boundaries. No matter where industrial production or consumption takes place, its consequences can be felt in very distant locations. The relatively rich countries are not immune from industrial pollution and global environmental damage. We will remain dependent on science and high technology, though, because it is only through these that industrial processes can be safely and effectively managed.

Beck wants to show us that the environmental issue is moving from the margins of political concern towards the centre. Most of the risks we face are the products of human activity; they are not like the purely natural disasters of film and television. This means that the environment becomes an issue for political debate and decision-making, and we can see the creation of environmental organizations and Green political parties in the 1970s as the first step towards inclusion of environmental issues into mainstream politics.

Critical points

One of the main criticisms of Beck's overall thesis is that there is not (yet) enough evidence to support his theory of the transition to a 'risk society', even though there is today more awareness of environmental risks (Hajer 1996). Similarly, the idea that older forms of class-based politics are losing out to a new politics of risk seems premature. In most countries, Green political parties have not broken through the conventional party system, and globally the issue of wealth creation and distribution still tends to dominate over environmental protection whenever these objectives clash. Finally, it has been argued that the thesis fails to take account of cultural variability in definitions of risk (Douglas 1994; Scott 2000). What is defined as 'risk' in some societies may not be so defined in others, in the same way that what is defined as pollution in wealthy

industrial societies is often seen as a sign of healthy economic development in poorer developing countries.

Contemporary significance

The concept of risk holds a special place in current sociological debates on environmental issues and the direction of social change. Beck's risk thesis is useful, because it provides part of an explanation for why environmental movement concerns have found such a receptive audience. Once people become sensitized to risks, the arguments of environmentalists begin to make more sense. Beck's *Risk Society* has taken sociological thinking on modernity and its possible futures in a new and highly original direction, making us rethink the sociological tradition, and for this reason it has rightly become a modern classic of social theory.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> How aware are you of risks in your everyday life? Do you engage in any 'risk-taking activities' and, if so, why do you do it? Is risk always a negative part of modern life or can you think of any positive aspects?

Consumerism and environmental damage

One important 'manufactured risk' is environmental damage caused by patterns of mass consumption. Consumption refers to the goods, services, energy and resources that are used by people, and it is a phenomenon with both positive and negative dimensions. On the one hand, rising levels of consumption around the world mean that people are living under better conditions than in the past. On the other hand, mass consumption has negative impacts too. Consumption patterns can damage the environmental resource base and exacerbate patterns of inequality.

It has been argued that industrial capitalism sets societies on a 'treadmill of production' leading to environmental damage, using up natural resources at a rapid rate and generating high levels of pollution

and waste (Schnaiberg 1980). However, in the twentieth century it was modern consumerism which kept that treadmill running faster in this direction (Bell 2011). Consumption is something that human beings have to engage in to survive, but modern consumption is very different from earlier forms.

Mass production must be accompanied by large-scale consumption. The products of industry have to be bought and consumed, though producing and consuming may well be carried out in geographically distant locations. Products are made wherever it is cheapest to do so and consumed wherever the best price can be gained. In the past sixty years or so, this has led to industrial production moving to developing countries. The rapid transformation of the newly industrializing countries (NICs), such as Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore and Taiwan in the 1970s and recent industrial development in India, China and Malaysia, testifies to this, which is part of the globalization process.

Sociologists also view consumerism as a way of thinking, a mentality or even an ideology (Corrigan 1997; Campbell 1992). We can understand this aspect if we ask why people continually consume and want to consume. Perhaps it is simply because consumer goods have 'use-value' for people, helping to save them time and effort. But luxury items fit this explanation less well. They show another side to modern consumerism – its role in the social status competition within society (see [chapter 12](), 'Social Interaction and Daily Life'). Differentiated mass consumption allows for complex, fine-grained distinctions to be made according to the styles and fashions of the day. People may be prepared to pay a premium for the latest fashions because these products allow them to say something about themselves, to communicate their status or aspirations in a highly visible way. Even products with a clear use-value, such as clothes, are also fashionable items that are discarded and replaced before their 'use-value' has expired. Large amounts of such fashion-fuelled waste increase pressure on the environment.

Over time, consumer products become embedded into the routines of everyday life and are taken for granted. When this happens, it becomes difficult to think there is an alternative. Concerns about plastic pollution and its effects on marine life led to charging for plastic carrier bags and the promotion of stronger, 'bags for life' aimed at breaking

shoppers' routine expectation of free plastic bags and educating them at the same time. This is a simple example of targeted, pro-environment behaviour modification. Similar campaigns continue today in relation to 'fast-coffee' cups, straws and lids and a range of plastic packaging from major retail chains.

Decarbonizing the 'car system'?

Perhaps the best example of an environmentally damaging consumer product is the motor vehicle, particularly the private car (Lucas et al. 2011). Many households have one, two, or more cars, and people use them even for very short trips to the shops, taking children to school or visiting nearby friends and relatives. But large-scale car-ownership and use generates large amounts of pollution and waste and is a major contributor to greenhouse gases. Why has it proved so difficult to reduce our use of the car?

Most drivers are extremely reluctant to give up the family car, 4 × 4, SUV or small hatchback on purely environmental grounds, despite a growing body of evidence demonstrating the negative aspects of private car-ownership. Thousands of deaths are due to low-level vehicle pollution in urban areas, and residential streets are blighted by mass vehicle ownership, yet the private car remains deeply enmeshed in our daily lives (Mattioli 2014). A partial explanation of this is that the car is extremely functional for the conduct of modern life. Many cities have been built around vehicle movements rather than cycling or walking, and, as Shove and her colleagues argue, cars are '[a] consequence of the extent to which driving has become integral to the conduct of an increasing range of social practices including shopping, commuting and getting to school' (Shove et al.: 2015: 275).

One survey of attitudes to car-ownership found a range of consumer types among visitors to National Trust properties in the north-west of England (Anable 2005). The largest group consisted of *Malcontented Motorists*. They are unhappy with many aspects of their car use but feel that public transport has too many constraints to be a genuine alternative, so they do not switch. Second are *Complacent Car Addicts*, who accept that there are alternatives to using the car but do not feel any pressing moral imperative to change. Third are *Aspiring*

Environmentalists. This group has already reduced their usage but feel the car has advantages that force them not to give it up altogether. Fourth are *Die-hard Drivers*, who feel they have a right to drive, enjoy driving and have negative feelings towards other modes of transportation, such as buses and trains. Fifth, *Car-less Crusaders* have given up their cars for environmental reasons and see alternative modes of travel in a positive light. Last are the *Reluctant Riders*, who use public transport but would prefer to use a car; however, for a variety of reasons, such as health problems, they cannot do this, but will accept lifts from others. This study shows that blanket appeals to an emerging environmental awareness to promote public transport use and a shift to electric cars are likely to fail. Instead, 'the segmentation approach illustrates that policy interventions need to be responsive to the different motivations and constraints of the sub-groups' (ibid.: 77).

Some sociologists argue that, seen in the long term, the 'century of the car' may be coming to an end anyway, as oil supplies have peaked, the mitigation of global warming is leading to a push for new, 'low-carbon' technologies, and rising population levels make mass individual car-ownership unsustainable (Dennis and Urry 2009). The current shift towards electric vehicles, particularly cars, vans and buses, may offer a way of radically cutting CO_2 emissions while maintaining the freedom of movement that many people have grown used to.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

5.3 The car is dead – long live the car?

In the UK, transport emissions accounted for around 28 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions in 2016, while cars, vans and HGVs made up some 87 per cent of these (Committee on Climate Change 2018: 150). Encouraging and facilitating the move away from petrol and diesel to electric cars would therefore make a major contribution to hitting the UK's target of net zero CO_2 emissions by 2050. And though electric car sales are increasing, by 2020 the take-up was not rapid.

In Norway, by contrast, electric car-ownership has increased rapidly since 2010. In March 2019, battery electric vehicles (BEVs) made up 58.9 per cent of the country's new car sales. In the UK, the figure was just 0.9 per cent (Browning 2019). Indeed, Norway is a leader in switching from fossil-fuelled to electric cars. Transport analysts point to the many benefits and government incentives which encourage Norwegian consumers to make the move. For example, electric car owners do not pay the 25 per cent VAT on the purchase, and they can use bus lanes, park for free in many car parks and parking areas, charge for free at the kerbside, and pay no or reduced road tolls (Lindeman 2018).

Norway's electric car revolution is much lauded, but it has been built on a raft of government incentives, such as free city-centre car parks for electric cars. Will other governments be prepared to commit to this approach?

Yet Norway's economic success is far from an environmentalist's dream, as its wealth since the 1980s has actually been built on fossil fuels. Around half of Norway's export earnings are from oil and gas, and in 2017 the country became the second largest gas exporter behind Russia (Perrone 2019). The generous electric car incentives are also gradually being reined in. At the time of writing, there are plans to remove the VAT exemption in 2020, to end free battery charging, and to impose road tolls on BEVs. However, petrol and diesel vehicles will still face higher taxes and charges than BEVs, keeping the latter as a competitive option. Whether other countries are prepared or even able to follow Norway's lead remains, for now, an open question.

Yet we should remember that electric cars are still cars – they have to be manufactured, powered and disposed of at the end of their life, they need parking spaces and roads, and they bring about traffic congestion. Therefore they continue to generate similar social and environmental problems to other types of car. In addition, electric vehicles are environmentally beneficial only if the electricity they use is produced from low- or zero-carbon sources such as Norway's hydro-electric system or renewables such as solar or wind. And even here the mass take-up of electric cars will require a major expansion of electricity generation capacity. Where coal, oil and gas remain key planks of a country's energy mix, the environmental benefits of electric cars may not be so clear.

Dennis and Urry argue that the twentieth-century 'car system' of mass individual ownership of petrol-fuelled vehicles driving around extensive road networks may not survive in its present form, and they are likely to be correct. But the 'electric car system' of the future, despite playing a key role in reducing CO_2 emissions, currently looks a lot like the old oil-based one. At least in the short to medium term, the private car looks set to retain its symbolic value as part of the transition to independent living and adulthood as well as embodying the modern ideals of freedom and liberation.

Consumerism: a romantic ethic?

A further aspect of modern consumerism is its pleasurable aspect. But *why* is it pleasurable? Some have argued that the pleasure of consumerism lies not in the *use* of products but in the *anticipation* of

purchasing them. Colin Campbell (1992) argues that this is *the most* pleasurable part of the process – the wanting, the longing after, the seeking out and desiring of products, not the use of them. It is a 'romantic ethic' of consumption based on desire and longing. Marketing of products and services draws on this anticipatory consumerism in seductive ways to create and intensify people's desires. That is why we keep going back for more and are never truly satisfied.

From an environmental perspective, the 'romantic ethic' of consumerism is disastrous. We constantly demand new products and more of them. That means more production, so the cycle of mass production and mass consumption continues to churn out pollution and wastes natural resources. At the input side of production, natural resources are used up in enormous quantities, and, at the output end in consumption, people throw away useful things not because they are *use-less*, but because they are no longer in fashion or fail to represent their status aspirations.

The sociology of consumption shows us that the combination of industrialization, capitalism and consumerism has transformed society–environment relations. Many environmentalists and more than a few social and natural scientists have concluded that continuous economic growth cannot carry on indefinitely. The resulting pollution might have been ecologically insignificant if it had been restricted to a small part of the global human population. However, when industrialization spreads across the planet, when a majority of people live in huge cities, and when capitalist companies become multinational and consumerism seduces people in all countries, then the natural environment's capacity for recovery and resilience becomes severely weakened.

Although the rich are the world's main consumers, the environmental damage caused by growing levels of consumption has the heaviest impact on the poor. As we saw in our discussion of global warming, the wealthy are in a better position to enjoy the many benefits of consumption while avoiding its negative effects. At the local level, affluent groups can usually afford to move away from problem areas, leaving the poor to bear the costs. Chemical plants, power stations, major roads, railways and airports are often sited close to low-income

areas, and on a global level we can see a similar process at work: soil degradation, deforestation, water shortages, lead emissions and air pollution are all increasingly concentrated within the developing world. What is needed is a perspective which connects the developed and developing countries within a single project, and sustainable development aims to do exactly that.

Limits to growth and sustainable development

In *The Ecologist*, a UK campaigning magazine, Edward Goldsmith and his colleagues set out the charge against industrial expansion in their *A Blueprint for Survival* (1972: 15): 'The principal defect of the industrial way of life with its ethos of expansion is that it is not sustainable ... we can be certain ... that sooner or later it will end.' Such doom-laden forecasts used to be described as 'catastrophist' and were restricted to the wilder fringes of the environmental movement. However, the idea now has wider currency among young people, members of the public and policy-makers. Sustainability is a central motivating idea for environmental campaigners – ensuring that human activity does not compromise the ecology of planet Earth.

One important influence on the rise of environmental movements and public concern about environmental problems can be traced back to a famous report first published in the early 1970s, which set out the case that economic growth could not continue indefinitely. The report and its findings are discussed in 'Classic studies' 5.2.

Sustainable development

Rather than simply calling for economic growth to be reined in, more recent developments turn on the concept of sustainable development. This was first introduced in a report commissioned by the United Nations, *Our Common Future* (WCED 1987). This is also known as the Brundtland Report, after the chair of the organizing committee, Gro Harlem Brundtland, then prime minister of Norway. The report's authors argued that use of the Earth's resources by the present generation was unsustainable.

The Brundtland Commission regarded sustainable development as 'development which meets the needs of the present generation, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs' (WCED 1987) – a pithy definition, but one which carries enormous significance. Sustainable development means that economic growth should be carried on in such a way as to recycle physical resources rather than deplete them and to keep levels of pollution to a minimum. However, the definition is open to criticism. How many generations should be considered – five, ten, or more? How can we know what are the 'needs' of the present generation? How can we compare human needs in developing countries with those in the relatively rich countries? These questions are still debated, though the concept of sustainable development – however problematic – continues to motivate many individuals and voluntary groups.

Modelling the limits to economic growth

The research problem

Global human population has grown enormously since industrialization took hold, and the resulting pressure on the environment has led to soil degradation, deforestation and pollution. Are there any limits to this pattern of development? Will food supplies keep up with increasing demand or will the world see mass famine? How many people can the planet support without ruining the environment? These hugely significant questions were asked of a group of scientists by a global think tank, the Club of Rome, almost forty years ago. The resulting book was published as *The Limits to Growth* (Meadows et al. 1972).

Meadows and colleagues' explanation

The *Limits* study used modern computermodelling techniques to make forecasts about the consequences of continued economic growth, population growth, pollution and the depletion of natural resources. Their computer model – *World3* – showed what would happen if the trends that were established between 1900 and 1970 were to continue to the year 2100. The computer projections were then altered to generate a variety of possible consequences, depending on different rates of growth of the factors considered. The researchers found that, each time they altered one variable, there would eventually be an environmental crisis. If the world's societies failed to change, then growth would end anyway sometime before 2100, through the depletion of resources, food shortages or industrial collapse.

The research team used computer modelling to explore five global trends (Meadows et al. 1972: 21):

- accelerating industrialization across the world
- rapid population growth

- widespread malnutrition in some regions

- depletion of non-renewable resources

- a deteriorating natural environment.

The programme was then run to test twelve alternative scenarios, each one manipulated to resolve some of the identified problems. This allowed the researchers to ask questions about which combinations of population levels, industrial output and natural resources would be sustainable. The conclusion they drew in 1972 was that there *was* still time to put off the emerging environmental crisis. But, if nothing was done – and even if the amount of available resources in the model were doubled, pollution were reduced to pre-1970s levels and new technologies were introduced – economic growth would still grind to a halt before 2100. Some campaigners saw this as vindicating the radical environmental argument that industrial societies were just not sustainable over the long term.

Critical points

Many economists, politicians and industrialists roundly condemned the report, arguing that it was unbalanced, irresponsible and, when its predictions failed to materialize, just plain wrong. The modelling was largely devoid of political and social variables and was therefore just a partial account of reality. The researchers later accepted that some of the criticisms were justified. The method used focused on *physical* limits and assumed existing rates of economic growth and technological innovation, but this did not take account of the capacity of human beings to respond to environmental challenges. For example, market forces could be made to work to limit the over-exploitation of resources. If a mineral such as magnesium starts to become scarce, its price will rise. As its price rises it will be used less, and producers might even find alternatives should costs rise too steeply. *Limits* was seen by many as yet another overly pessimistic, catastrophist tract that engaged in unreliable 'futurology' – predicting the future from current trends.

Contemporary significance

Whatever its limitations, the original report made a significant impact on public debate and environmental activism. It made many more people aware of the damaging consequences of industrial development and technology, as well as warning about the perils of allowing pollution to increase. The report was an important catalyst for the modern environmental movement (for a wider discussion, see chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'). Twenty years later, the team published *Beyond the Limits* (1992), an even more pessimistic report, castigating the world's politicians for wasting the time, arguing that ecological 'overshoot' was *already* occurring. Then, in 2004, their *30-Year Update* was released, arguing that, although some progress had been made in environmental awareness and technological development, the evidence of global warming, declining fish stocks, and much more, showed a world 'overshooting' its natural limits. This conclusion was also that of the UN Millennium Ecosystem Assessment Board of 2005, which is tellingly titled *Living Beyond our Means*. The basic conclusion from the original *Limits* report and its updates continues to resonate.

Following the publication of *Our Common Future*, 'sustainable development' came to be widely used by both environmentalists and governments. It was employed at the UN Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and has subsequently appeared in other meetings organized by the UN, such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002. Sustainable development is the overarching UN framework covering a series of seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) goals for the period 2015 to 2030, including the elimination of poverty and hunger, gender equality, clean water and good sanitation for all, responsible consumption and production, protecting life on land, and taking action on climate change (UN 2019b).

Critics see the concept of sustainable development as too vague, neglecting the specific needs of poorer countries. It has been argued that the concept tends to focus attention only on the needs of richer countries; it does not consider how high levels of consumption in the more affluent countries are satisfied at the expense of people in developing countries. For instance, demands on Indonesia to conserve its rainforests could be seen as unfair, because Indonesia has a greater need than the industrialized countries for the revenue it must forgo.

Linking the concept of ecological sustainability to that of economic development appears contradictory. This is particularly pertinent where sustainability and development clash – for example, when considering new roads or retail sites, it is often the case that the prospect of new jobs and economic prosperity means sustainability takes second place, especially in times of economic recession. This is even more pronounced for governments in developing countries, which are badly in need of more economic activity. In recent years, ideas of environmental justice and ecological citizenship have come to the fore (as we see below), partly as a result of the severe problems associated with the concept and practice of sustainable development.

It is easy to be sceptical about the future prospects for sustainable development. Its aim of finding ways of balancing human activity with sustaining natural ecosystems may appear impossibly utopian. Nonetheless, sustainable development looks to create common ground among nation-states and connects the world development movement with the environmental movement in a way that no other project has yet managed to do. It gives radical environmentalists the opportunity to push for full implementation of its widest goals, but, at the same time, moderate campaigners can be involved locally and exert some

influence. A more technology-focused approach, which may be seen as close to the sustainable development project, is known as ecological modernization, and we introduce this in the next section.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Sustainable development is 'development which meets the needs of the present generation, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' How could we find out what the *needs* of future generations will be? Can sustainable development policies be devised from this definition?

Ecological modernization

For environmentalists, both capitalist and communist forms of modernization have failed. They have delivered wealth and material success, but at the price of massive environmental damage. In recent years, groups of academic social scientists in Western Europe have developed a theoretical perspective called ecological modernization (EMT), which accepts that 'business as usual' is no longer possible but also rejects radical environmentalist solutions involving de-industrialization. Instead they focus on technological innovation and the use of market mechanisms to bring about positive outcomes, transforming production methods and reducing pollution at its source.

EMT sees huge potential in the leading European industries to reduce the use of natural resources *without* this affecting economic growth. This is an unusual position, but it does have a certain logic. Rather than simply rejecting economic growth, proponents argue that an *ecological form* of growth is theoretically possible. An example is the introduction of catalytic converters and emission controls on motor vehicles, which has been delivered within a short period of time and shows that advanced technologies can make a big difference to greenhouse gas emissions. If environmental protection really can be achieved this way, especially in renewable energy generation and transport, then we can continue to enjoy our high-technology lifestyles.

Ecological modernizers also argue that, if consumers demand environmentally sound production methods and products, market mechanisms will be forced to try and deliver them. Opposition to GM food in Europe (discussed above) is a good example of this idea in practice. Supermarkets have not stocked or pushed the supply of GM foods, because large numbers of consumers have made it clear that they will stay on the shelves.

The theory of ecological modernization sees that five social and institutional structures need to be ecologically transformed:

1. *science and technology*: to work towards the invention and delivery of sustainable technologies

2. *markets and economic agents*: to introduce incentives for environmentally benign outcomes

3. *nation-states*: to shape market conditions which allow this to happen

4. *social movements*: to put pressure on business and the state to continue moving in an ecological direction

5. *ecological ideologies*: to assist in persuading more people to get involved in the ecological modernization of society (Mol and Sonnenfeld 2000).

Global society 5.3 Solar power: ecological modernization in practice?

A key plank of the ecological modernization perspective is that non-polluting technologies, such as renewable energy projects, can make a big impact on greenhouse gas emissions. Renewable technologies can also be made available to developing countries to help them avoid the high-polluting forms of industrialization which have caused so much environmental degradation.

One widely reported recent example is the massive solar power plant (actually four linked sites) being constructed in Ouarzazate, Morocco, which could supply the energy needs of 1 million people. This is crucial to the country's ambitious target of generating over 40 per cent of its electricity from renewables – a huge change given its previously heavy reliance on imported fossil fuels such as coal and gas. The technologically innovative aspect of the plant is not just its size – the many rows of solar mirrors cover an area as large as thirty-five football pitches or the size of the capital city, Rabat – but also its attempt to store the energy generated from the sun using salt.

The plant generates heat that melts the salt, which is then able to store the heat, which in turn generates enough steam to power turbines overnight. Morocco's hot desert climate is a necessary environment for such a scheme. The solar mirrors are more expensive to produce than conventional photovoltaic panels, but the big advantage is that they continue generating power even after sundown. The storage system promises to hold energy for up to eight hours, meaning that a continuous solar energy supply should be possible.

When the plant is completed, the hope is that enough energy will be generated to allow Morocco to export some of it to Europe. The project is a public–private partnership and will cost around $9 billion, much of which is from the World Bank and other private and

public financial institutions. But, if it fulfils its promises, the Noor Ouarzazate complex may be one of the most striking and successful practical examples of ecological modernization yet seen.

Sources: World Bank (2015); Harrabin (2015); Neslen (2015).

Science and technology have a particularly crucial role in developing preventative solutions, building in ecological considerations at the design stage. This will transform currently polluting production systems.

Since the mid-1990s, three new areas of debate have entered the ecological modernization perspective. First, research began to expand to the developing countries, significantly challenging the Eurocentrism of the original perspective. Second, once ecological modernizers started to think beyond the West, the theory of globalization became more relevant (Mol 2001). Third, ecological modernization has started to take account of the sociology of consumption and theories of consumer societies. These studies look at how consumers can play a part in the ecological modernization of society and how domestic technologies can be improved to reduce energy consumption, save scarce resources (such as water) and contribute to waste reduction through recycling.

Renewable forms of energy, such as this offshore wind farm in the North Sea, are often cited as clear evidence that an ecological form of modernization is a real possibility.

The possibilities offered by EMT can be illustrated by reference to the waste disposal industry, which gets rid of the waste products that industries and consumers generate every day. Until recently, most of this waste was simply processed and buried in landfill sites. Today, the whole industry is being transformed. Technological developments make it much cheaper to produce newsprint from recycled paper than from wood pulp. Hence there are good economic reasons, as well as environmental ones, to use and reuse paper instead of endlessly cutting down trees. Not just individual companies but whole industries are actively pursuing the goal of 'zero waste' – the complete recycling of all waste products for future industrial use. Toyota and Honda have already reached a level of 85 per cent recyclability for the car parts they use. In this context, waste is no longer just the harmful dumping of materials but a resource for industry and, to some extent, a means of driving further innovation.

Significantly, some of the major contributions to recycling, and therefore to sustainable development, have come from areas with a heavy concentration of information technology industries, such as California's Silicon Valley. Some ecological modernizers suggest that information technology, unlike many older forms of industrial production, is environmentally clean and, the more it plays a part in industrial production, the greater the likelihood that harmful environmental effects will be reduced. However, such optimism may be misguided. IT systems, the internet and cloud computing are energy intensive, demanding huge data-storage facilities. They have been seen as a new form of 'heavy industry' rather than as part of some 'weightless economy' and, as such, do not provide a simple solution to problems of economic development (Strand 2008).

The issue of energy-intensive information technology is discussed in chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life'. Cloud computing and related matters can be found in chapter 19, 'The Media'.

Unlike other perspectives, EMT is concerned less with global inequality and more with how businesses, individuals and non-state actors can all play a part in transforming society. This makes it different from sustainable development, which begins from the premise that reducing global inequality is a prerequisite for environmental protection. Ecological modernizers also argue that, if the capitalist economic system can be made to work for environmental protection, capitalism will continue; but, if not, something different will necessarily emerge, because the ecological modernization of global society is already well under way.

Critics have seen EMT as overly reliant on technological fixes and as relatively ignorant of cultural, social and political conflicts. Indeed, with its focus on developments in Europe, technological solutions and free markets, ecological modernization, argues Foster (2012), lies closer to

a much older form of capitalist modernization theory than to a genuinely environmental sociology. In this sense, it harks back to the notion of human exemptionalism that environmental sociologists saw as the main ideological obstacle to bringing the environment into sociological theory. Ewing (2017) maintains that the focus on continuing economic growth and profitability puts EMT into the framework of promoting a self-defeating 'green capitalism' that is incapable of dealing with today's global environmental issues with the necessary urgency and, therefore, should be rejected.

Ecological modernization certainly is imbued with technological optimism and does not have a fully worked-out theory of how to get from where we are into a sustainable society. Yet some EM theorists claim to be 'agnostic' about the future of capitalism. That is, if capitalism assists in the transition to long-term sustainability, then it could survive; however, if it becomes an obstacle, then it will die, and rightly so. Perhaps the real value of the EMT approach lies in the myriad real-world examples that it produces, alongside the practical technologies and suggestions for change it offers. Collectively, these could make a significant contribution in tackling environmental problems, provided that these can be made financially viable in the Global South as well as in the North.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Look again at the five social and institutional structures that constitute an ecologically modernist approach to environmental problems. List them in order of current progress – which structure has been transformed the most and which the least? What obstacles are harder to overcome in transforming social structures in environmentally sensitive directions?

Even the strongest advocates of ecological modernization accept that rescuing the global environment will require changes in the levels of social inequality that currently exist. Poverty is a prime contributor to practices that lead to environmental damage, and people living in conditions of economic hardship have no choice but to make maximum use of the local resources available to them. What will be needed are

'just sustainabilities' (Agyeman et al. 2003; Smith and Pangsapa 2008). Achieving ecological sustainability demands that concerted international efforts are made to tackle global inequalities as a necessary condition for environmental protection.

Environmental justice and ecological citizenship

Environmental justice is a term that originated in the USA with the formation of grassroots networks of activists in working-class communities (Szasz 1994; Bell 2004: ch. 1; Visgilio and Whitelaw 2003). Many of these were African-American neighbourhoods, and the selection of these areas for dumping hazardous waste and siting incinerators was seen by activists as a type of 'environmental racism' (Bullard 1993). Environmental justice campaigns can be seen as an extension of civil rights discourse into the arena of environmental issues, focusing on the way that many environmental problems 'bear down disproportionately on the poor' (Agyeman et al. 2003: 1).

An important foundational campaign was that of Lois Gibbs in Niagara Falls, New York, in 1978, who sought to relocate the Love Canal community, which she discovered had been built on a 20,000-ton toxic chemical dump. The community campaign was ultimately successful when 900 working-class families were relocated away from the leaking dump in 1980 (Gibbs 2002). Linking environmental quality to social class inequalities shows that environmentalism is not just a middle-class concern but can be related to working-class interests and takes account of social inequalities and real-world 'risk positions'. In the USA, toxic waste sites have tended to be situated in black and Hispanic communities, where citizens' action groups are relatively less powerful, but Gibbs's working-class campaign showed that they are not powerless.

Environmental justice groups can be very significant. Their emergence has the potential to broaden the support base of environmental politics to currently under-represented groups within the wider environmental movement. For instance, Friends of the Earth International (among others), recognizing the need to tackle social problems if pressures on

the natural environment are to be relieved (Rootes 2005), has expanded its agenda. Environmental justice takes us into the urban and inner-city areas, where most of the waste products of modern life wind up, and this opens environmental politics to people who may not have thought about their problems as being at all 'environmental'.

Perhaps the most significant consequence of environmental justice groups is that they offer the possibility of linking environmental politics across the developed and developing societies. An important example was the protest against the impact of the multinational oil company Shell on the environment of the indigenous Ogoni people in Nigeria. The campaign of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People (formed in 1990) and the international support it garnered is just one example of the potentially unifying concept of environmental justice. Attempts by the Nigerian government to put down the resistance movement involved torture, ransacking of villages and, in 1995, the execution of nine members of the movement's leadership, including the writer Ken Saro-Wiwa, in the face of international protest (Watts 1997).

Such events reinforce the argument that the relatively powerless bear the brunt of environmental pollution. Environmental justice campaigns demonstrate the potential to link social inequalities and poverty to environmental issues, promising to make environmentalism more than just a nature-defence movement. Recently the concept of a 'social licence' has been used to describe the dynamic relations between companies and communities (Soyka 2012: ch. 4). For instance, communities and citizens' groups may informally 'grant' an ongoing social licence to a company seeking to begin mining operations, promising new jobs and economic development. But that approval or 'licence' may be withdrawn if unnecessary environmental damage is caused, perceptions change and business operations are deemed illegitimate. Awareness of the need for a social licence to operate can empower local communities, as it has to be earned and sustained by companies if they are to benefit from citizens' approval (Syn 2014).

One final development worthy of note is the emergence of a proposed form of citizenship linked to the defence of the natural environment. Some sociologists and political scientists have argued that a new form of citizenship is emerging, which M. J. Smith (1998) has called

[ecological citizenship](#) and Dobson and Bell (2006) refer to as environmental citizenship.

Ecological citizenship is a fourth stage of citizenship beyond the existing civil, political and social types, involving new obligations: to non-human animals, to future generations of human beings, and to maintaining the integrity of the natural environment (Sandilands 1999). Obligations to animals means reconsidering human uses of animals that infringe their right to lead a natural life and express their natures. Hence, vivisection, hunting, farming methods, breeding and even pet-keeping would all need to be reassessed. Ecological citizenship's obligation to future generations of people means working towards sustainability over a long time period. If economic development plans threaten the ability of future generations to provide for their own needs, then other forms will need to be designed and planned. Political and economic planning must become future-oriented and take a long-term view rather than adopting a short-term, free-market or laissez-faire approach. Finally, all human activity should be considered with reference to its effects on the natural environment, and a *precautionary principle* should be adopted that puts the onus on developers to justify their actions in ecological terms.

In essence, ecological citizenship introduces a new demand for people to take account of their 'ecological footprint' – the impact of human activity on the natural environment. Clearly, ecological citizenship demands some fundamental changes to modern societies. Perhaps the most radical change would be to people themselves, as ecological citizenship requires a transformed human experience of nature and the self as tightly bound together. In the same way that people had to start to perceive themselves as citizens with rights in order for political

citizenship to take hold, so ecological citizenship is unlikely to develop fully unless people's identities also include the experience of having an 'ecological self'.

An Anthropocene era?

Geologists call the period of Earth history following the glacial retreat of the last 'Ice Age' the Holocene, which covers the last 12,000 years. In the twenty-first century, some scientists now argue that we have left the Holocene behind and moved into a new epoch known as the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Stoermer 2000). As the name suggests, the Anthropocene is a period in which human activity has become the dominant force shaping ecosystems and the global climate, and which will be identifiable in the geological record. It seems clear that the concept is closely tied to scientific evidence of anthropogenic climate change and its impact.

In the Anthropocene, the older separation of nature and society as distinct spheres representing the biological and the social appears to have collapsed. Not only are nature and society essentially intertwined, but the era of nature as an independently developing force is over (Walsh 2012). Instead, human activity has become the driving force in how life on Earth is developing now and will develop in the future (Fletcher 2019: 523). For some, the Anthropocene era began with the Industrial Revolution, as fossil fuels and machinery replaced animal and human labour, bringing with it increased greenhouse gas emissions and pollution. For others, the key starting point was the rapid development and spread of consumer culture in the 1950s and 1960s (Lidskog and Waterton 2016: 398). This period saw the rapid growth of the global human population, huge expansion of the aviation industry, mass private car-ownership and the industrialization of agriculture, alongside a step change in the amount of mat erial waste produced.

Although the Anthropocene is an emerging concept that is by no means accepted by all, it has brought into sharp focus the issue of human 'stewardship' of the Earth. Even if we accept that human societies have brought about a new era, this was not a planned development but the consequence of industrial capitalist evolution and the constant pressure for economic growth, however environmentally damaging that might be. Should we accept that human beings are now stewards of the planet with all the responsibility that brings, or do we work to

radically reduce the human impact on the planet in order to preserve a distinct, independent world of nature? Theorists of the Anthropocene argue that the latter option has already been bypassed. There is no longer a 'nature' separate from humanity.

Today we are able to acknowledge the dark side of modern industry, technology and science, which the classical sociologists could not have foreseen. Scientific and technological developments have created a world of high-consequence risks that make possible both huge gains and losses. Yet, with a growing global human population, the idea that a majority of people could 'go back' to living more 'natural' lives in close contact with the land is patently unrealistic. As ecological modernization suggests, advanced technologies and scientific research will be vital factors in the quest for sustainable solutions in the emergent Anthropocene era.

？ **Chapter review**

1. What evidence is there *against* the idea of human exemptionalism? If human beings are part of the natural world, why do we need a distinct *social* science to study their actions and societies?

2. Using one example from the chapter, show what social constructionism brings to our understanding of the issue. Constructionism is often said to be agnostic towards the reality of environmental problems. How might this help or hinder our understanding of global warming?

3. In what ways do critical realist studies add something over and above social constructionist accounts? How could realism and constructionism be combined in environmental sociology?

4. What is a manufactured risk? Using examples from the chapter, compare manufactured with natural risks, bringing out their key differences.

5. What are the main arguments in favour of the genetic modification of food? Why have these products been routinely rejected in Europe?

6. Environmental campaigners called for governments around the world to declare a 'climate emergency' following the IPCC's 2018 report on global warming. How can sociologists contribute to our understanding of climate change and the policies aimed at decarbonizing society?

7. What is the 'treadmill of production and consumption', and what are its main environmental consequences for a) developed countries and b) developing countries?

8. In what practical ways do sustainable development initiatives differ from mainstream economic development? Is the concept better suited to the industrialized countries than to developing ones?

9. What is meant by 'ecological modernization'? Which aspects of this perspective are more likely to be adopted by governments and which are likely to be dismissed? Is ecological modernization essentially just a series of linked technological fixes?

10. How might the concept of environmental justice hinder attempts to tackle the 'climate emergency'? Can people be expected to become good ecological citizens without a shift towards environmental justice?

🔍 **Research in practice**

People looking for new experiences in their leisure time often take holidays to places they have never been before. Some of these have been labelled forms of ecotourism – seeking out satisfying experiences that are close to nature or natural landscapes that are not available at home. Trips to see a natural 'wilderness', climb in the high mountains or see 'wild' animals in their natural environment have become quite common. But critics have questioned the sustainability of ecotourism, pointing to some of its negative environmental consequences, such as greenhouse gas emissions from flights and damage to the very environments that are valued caused by the accommodation blocks and modern facilities expected by tourists.

In recent years, a further form of ecotourism has been identified in which tourists seek out not a perceived wild nature but a natural world that is fast disappearing as a result of the global impact of climate change and increased biodiversity loss. This has been referred to as 'Anthropocene tourism'. For example, people travel to witness first-hand the retreating glaciers, species on the brink of extinction, or low-lying islands threatened by rising sea levels. How can sociologists understand the development and attraction of this kind of disaster tourism experience? Read the paper below and answer the questions that follow.

Fletcher, R. (2019) 'Ecotourism after Nature: Anthropocene Tourism as a New Capitalist "Fix"', *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 27(4): 522–35.

1. This paper is based on the analysis of secondary sources. How would you characterize the author's theoretical position?

2. Explain the differences between the Anthropocene and the 'Capitalocene'. What is meant by 'disaster capitalism'?

3. List the main types of tourism discussed here and provide at least one example of each.

4. The author argues that capitalism has an extraordinary ability to renew itself through 'creative destruction'. Discuss some of the ways this occurs in relation to Anthropocene tourism.

5. Thinking about the possible responses of tourists to their experiences, how might this form of tourism actually stimulate opposition to global capitalism?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Environmental issues are said to be 'hybrids' of nature and society, and it would seem obvious that interdisciplinary approaches, bringing together natural and social scientists, should offer a way forward. But why have such collaborations not routinely happened? Why do the social and natural sciences tend to go their separate ways? How are their research methods different? Do the social and natural sciences enjoy a similar or different status in society at large? Write a short essay exploring these questions and conclude with your own view of whether more interdisciplinarity is likely in future studies of environmental issues.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Chris Jordan's artwork has been characterized as 'environmental art', which often specializes in creating artworks from the waste produced by mass consumer culture. For example, in *Intolerable Beauty: Portraits of American Mass Consumption* (2003–5), his images of piles of discarded mobile phones and chargers, computer circuit boards, diodes and e-waste illustrate the enormity of the e-waste problem but also display the strange beauty of the consumer waste on show. Take a look at this work and his other projects, especially *Running the Numbers: An American Self-Portrait* (2006–), from his website: www.chrisjordan.com/gallery/intolerable/#cellphones2.

Do some background research into the environmental art movement since the 1960s, noting how this genre has changed over time. Jordan's photographic images are clearly not simple representations of nature but interventions in political debates around sustainability, consumerism and environmental activism. What do these images bring to our understanding of consumer culture and environmental sustainability? Why would the images not have the same power to disturb if they were taken at the production point of the objects rather than their endpoint? How might turning large piles of waste into beautiful art objects have the opposite of the desired effect and instead be assimilated into contemporary capitalist culture?

Further reading

A good place to start is with Michael M. Bell and Loka Ashwood's (2015) *An Invitation to Environmental Sociology* (5th edn, New York: Sage), which has lots of helpful examples to illustrate key environmental issues. Philip W. Sutton's (2007) *The Environment: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity) sets out the key sociological themes for newcomers to this area. *Sociological Theory and the Environment: Classical Foundations, Contemporary Insights* (2002), edited by Riley E. Dunlap, Frederick H. Buttel, Peter Dickens and August Gijswijt (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield), explores what the classics have to offer in this field.

John Hannigan's (2014) excellent *Environmental Sociology: A Social Constructionist Perspective* (3rd edn, London: Routledge) includes some very effective case studies, while Peter Dickens's (2004) *Social Theory and the Environment: Changing Nature, Changing Ourselves* (Cambridge: Polity) adopts a critical realist position and explains this with clarity. A good collection of essays on the sociology of global warming can be found in *Climate Change and Society: Sociological Perspectives* (2015), edited by Riley E. Dunlap and Robert J. Brulle (New York: Oxford University Press).

On sustainable development, John Blewitt's (2018) *Understanding Sustainable Development* (3rd edn, Abingdon: Routledge) is a very comprehensive and readable introduction. On the risk society, Ulrich Beck's (2009) *World at Risk* (Cambridge: Polity) is quite accessible. For ecological modernization, *The Ecological Modernization Reader: Environmental Reform in Theory and Practice* (2009), edited by Arthur P. J. Mol, David A. Sonnenfeld and Gert Spaargaren (London: Routledge), does precisely what it says.

For environmental justice and ecological citizenship, try Benito Cao's (2015) *Environment and Citizenship* (London: Routledge), a genuinely introductory text. Finally, Mark J. Smith and Piya Pangsapa's (2008) *Environment and Citizenship: Integrating Justice, Responsibility and Civic Engagement* (London: Zed Books) is a stimulating read.

For a collection of original readings on natural and urban environments, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ **Internet links**

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Environmental Organization Web Directory – US-based repository with lots of useful resources:
www.webdirectory.com/

European Environment Agency – a good resource base with some interesting surveys and other research:
www.eea.europa.eu/

Extinction Rebellion – international campaign for radical action to 'save the Earth':
https://rebellion.global/

Friends of the Earth International – campaigning environmental organization:
www.foei.org/

Greenpeace International – campaigning environmental organization:
www.greenpeace.org/international/

Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change – read the assessment reports, *2018 Special Report* and much more here:
www.ipcc.ch/

OECD – environment site with lots of data from OECD countries:
www.oecd.org/environment/

United Nations Development Programme – link to Human Development Reports and the UN Sustainable Development Goals:
www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html

CHAPTER 6

GLOBAL INEQUALITY

CONTENTS

Figure 6.1 World wealth map 2018, average wealth per adult (in US$)

Source: Shorrocks et al. (2018: 7)

Could you be among the top 50 per cent of wealth holders in the world? If you had net assets of US$4,210 in 2018, then you were. Congratulations. Could your personal wealth place you within the richest 10 per cent of the global population? For that you would have needed net assets of US$93,170. If you live in a developed industrial country and own a property, there is a very good chance that you *would* meet that criterion. And if you had net assets of at least US$871,320 then you were one of the wealthiest 1 per cent of people on planet Earth.

The study of social inequality is one of sociology's foundational subjects. Nineteenth-century capitalist industrialization increased the wealth of societies but also brought into sharp relief the growing gap between the incomes and wealth of rich and poor. Inequality within particular nation-state societies remains a key concern for many sociologists today. Yet as globalization processes brought societies and people into closer contact with each other, the focus has shifted to take in inequalities between societies and individuals at the global level. The place where individuals are born – the 'accident of birth' – can have a major influence on their prospects of living a comfortable, financially secure life.

The annual Global Wealth Reports published by the Credit Suisse Research Institute track movements in wealth holding, rather than incomes, across the world. In 2018 the group reported that the global average amount of wealth per adult stood at US$63,100, but the 17 per cent of the global adult population living in Europe and North America owned 60 per cent of total household wealth. The ten countries with the highest average wealth per adult (over US$100,000) were (in US$): Switzerland (530,240), Australia (411,060), USA (403,970), Belgium (313,050), Norway (291,100), New Zealand (289,900) Canada (288,260), Denmark (286,710), Singapore (283,260) and France (280,580) (Shorrocks et al. 2018: 7). At the other end of the global wealth distribution are those countries with an average wealth per adult below US$5,000, which are mainly in Central Africa and Central and South Asia. The bottom 50 per cent of adults owned less than 1 per cent of global wealth while the richest 10 per cent owned 85 per cent (ibid.: 9).

One of the world's richest people, Warren Buffett, has pledged to give away most of his personal wealth. Yet, despite giving away US$3.4 billion to charitable causes in 2018, his personal fortune actually rose by more than US$20 billion between 2014 and 2019.

Comparing the wealth of nations may appear to be a distinct form of analysis, entirely separate from the study of the wealth of individuals. But today that distinction has been severely eroded, largely because of the sheer size of the personal wealth held by the relatively small number of the richest people and families in the world. The top 1 per cent of the global adult population owned some 47 per cent of all household wealth in 2018, and that share has been increasing (Shorrocks et al. 2018). In 2014 Oxfam calculated that the eighty-five richest people in the world had as much wealth as the bottom 50 per cent of the global population, and the previous thirty years saw the rich getting richer (Oxfam 2014).

See chapter 17, 'Work and Employment' and chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare', for more on work and economic inequality.

In 2019, *Forbes* magazine found that the world had 2,153 billionaires with a combined wealth of US$8.7 trillion – US$2.3 trillion more than in 2014. Of these super-rich billionaires, just 244 were women. The USA still dominates *Forbes*'s rich list, with 607 billionaires, though smaller numbers are found on every continent (Cao 2019). The world's richest *individual* in 2019 was JeffBezos, founder and CEO of online retailer Amazon, with a personal fortune of US$131 billion – US$19 billion more than in 2018 (Dolan 2019). Twenty-first-century capitalism has clearly 'worked well' for the super-rich at the top of the global wealth pyramid, but their astounding success has crystallized the commonly held view that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer.

Evidence of the stark levels of inequality between nations and the enormous personal wealth of the world's richest sparked new movements for change and redistribution, including 'Occupy' movements in major cities around the world, protesting against corporate greed, corruption and global inequality. The '99 per cent'

movement has also called for significant tax increases on the global 1 per cent of super-rich individuals to pay for improved welfare and services for the rest of society. Even the world's richest individuals themselves have expressed concern. Warren Buffett, the third wealthiest person in the world in 2019, with a net worth of US$82.5 billion, has said that, 'While the poor and middle class fight for us in Afghanistan, and while most Americans struggle to make ends meet, we mega-rich continue to get our extraordinary tax breaks…. These and other blessings are showered upon us by legislators in Washington who feel compelled to protect us, much as if we were spotted owls or some other endangered species. It's nice to have friends in high places' (Buffett 2011).

THINKING CRITICALLY

On figure 6.1 above, where do you and members of you family sit within the average wealth holding per adult in the region where you live? Why might many of those whose wealth puts them in the world's richest 10 per cent not feel wealthy? If there is 'relative poverty', how might we define 'relative affluence'?

How has this small number of individuals and families accumulated such fabulous wealth? In the past, aristocrats passed wealth and property down through the family, but far fewer people now get rich this way. Most gain their fortunes from 'new entrepreneurial wealth', made rapidly in the course of a single lifetime, while others have built on businesses passed down to them. Many recent billionaires have benefited from globalization and the digital revolution, including Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, Microsoft's Bill Gates, Amazon's Jeff Bezos, Jan Koum of WhatsApp and Tencent's Ma Huateng.

The extreme inequalities of wealth and income across the world have caused much consternation. Billionaires see their wealth rising seemingly inexorably, while millions of people are drawn into the global workforce in developing countries working long hours for very little reward. Around 10 per cent of the global population were living on less than US$1.90 per day in 2015, an international measure of 'extreme poverty' (previously US$1.25 per day) that would be unimaginable in

the developed countries (Lakner et al. 2018: 2). For sociologists, issues of personal wealth and poverty are embedded within structured social inequalities which have consequences for all aspects of life, from physical and mental health to educational and work opportunities. This chapter looks further into the details of global inequality and how social scientists have explained its continuing existence.

If necessary, refer to chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change', for a reminder of the main terms of the globalization thesis.

Extremes of inequality

Since the mid-twentieth century, parents have assumed that their children would 'do better' financially than they had, as each generation becomes wealthier than the previous one. Yet, in recent years, new concerns have been raised about what is now called 'extreme inequality', in particular (as illustrated above) the rapid growth of wealth accumulating at the very top of the global distribution. These concerns are very much part of the *Zeitgeist* – the 'spirit of the age' – which is shaped in large measure by reaction to the 2008 financial crisis. While the majority of workers saw a decade of austerity politics, in which their wages stagnated, their jobs became less secure and welfare support diminished, the richest people saw their fortunes grow ever larger.

But there is a paradox here. Why, during a period of slow or zero economic growth, swingeing cuts to public spending and static or falling living standards, has the number of billionaires continued to increase? How have these people managed not just to hold onto their wealth but rapidly to increase it in such trying times? Arguably, the most satisfactory answer to date comes from French economic historian Thomas Piketty, whose weighty book *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2014) became a bestseller.

Piketty analysed long-term trends in the distribution of wealth in the developed economies since the eighteenth century, focusing particularly on those countries – such as Britain, Sweden, France, the USA and Germany – where the available data cover a very long period. In doing so, he produced an alternative account of and explanation for the persistence of striking inequality, as well as a strong critique of the way that contemporary economics is practised. Piketty's work has proved controversial, but it also reshaped the debate on capitalism and the possibility of moving towards greater economic equality.

Piketty takes issue with two important but opposing theories of capitalist development: the 'catastrophist' version of Karl Marx and the 'cornucopian' one laid out by Simon Kuznets. In the mid-nineteenth

century, Marx saw capitalism as an exploitative economic system which contained an internal dynamic leading inexorably to class conflict. This is because the working class would become increasingly poor or 'immiserated', while capitalists became richer and more powerful. At some point, class consciousness would develop and a revolution would overthrow the ruling capitalist class. Marx was broadly correct about the persistence of global inequality, according to Piketty, but economic growth and the spread of knowledge and skills have significantly improved the lives of workers in many countries.

On the other hand, in the post-war 1950s – a period of strong economic growth – Kuznets maintained that industrial capitalist economies initially produce stark inequality. But, as they develop and average incomes rise, inequality is gradually reduced, as the history of European and North American societies demonstrates. He argued that this developmental process would also apply to developing countries as they follow a similar path (see chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class', for the 'Kuznets Curve'). Though Kuznets's model seemed to fit 1950s economic development quite well, Piketty's data do not bear out his thesis but tell an altogether different story.

Capitalist economies did indeed exhibit a stark inequality, which continued to increase until the early twentieth century, although the period from the start of the First World War to the mid-1970s saw a counter-trend towards the flattening out of gross disparities of income and wealth. Since the 1980s, however, there has been a reversal of that trend, and inequality is now increasing again (Piketty calls this 'divergence'). So is the latter just a temporary 'blip' in the 'normal' movement towards more equality? Not so, argues Piketty. In fact, the real 'blip' was the twentieth-century movement towards equality (Piketty calls this 'convergence'), and that was due to specific events. The destruction wrought by two world wars, large-scale bankruptcies during the 1930s depression, the nationalization of key industries and the growing strength of trade unions combined to compress inequality. But, by the 1980s, capitalism returned to its long-term trend for capital accumulation at the top, and we should expect that to continue unless concerted action is taken by the people and governments of the world.

One reason for persistent accumulation at the top lies in the difference between economic growth rates (g) and net returns on capital investment (r). Seen in long-term perspective, returns on capital consistently outstrip economic growth rates, expressed in the pithy equation r > g. This means that those individuals and families which accumulated wealth and capital in the past will see their fortunes grow faster than those gaining their wealth purely from income. Piketty notes that, 'Between 1990 and 2010, the fortune of Bill Gates ... increased from $4 billion to $50 billion. At the same time, the fortune of Liliane Bettencourt – the heiress of L'Oréal ... – increased from $2 billion to $25 billion.' After inflation, both enjoyed a real return on their capital of 10–11 per cent per annum. Hence, 'Liliane Bettencourt, who never worked a day in her life, saw her fortune grow exactly as fast as Bill Gates, the high-tech pioneer, whose wealth has incidentally continued to grow just as rapidly since he stopped working. Once a fortune is established, the capital grows according to a dynamic of its own' (Piketty 2014: 440).

Millions of workers in developing countries, including many children, work long hours in 'sweatshops'. Has globalization been beneficial for these people?

This study puts empirical flesh on the commonplace truism that 'money makes money' or, as Piketty puts it himself, 'money tends to reproduce itself'. But is this a problem? Piketty (2014: 1) expresses deep disquiet about the social consequences of extreme inequality. He argues that, 'When the rate of return on capital exceeds the rate of growth of output and income, as it did in the nineteenth century and seems quite likely to do again in the twenty-first, capitalism automatically generates arbitrary and unsustainable inequalities that radically undermine the meritocratic values on which democratic societies are based.' Contemporary capitalism, a system ostensibly rooted in creativity, entrepreneurship and hard work, actually rewards idleness and inherited wealth. On its own terms, this is a major contradiction at the heart of capitalism today.

Nonetheless, Piketty offers some policy solutions that could halt the trend and promote the general interest over individual gain. Chief among these is a progressive annual global tax on wealth, not income. The primary aim would be not to fund generous welfare or social services (though it may be used for these) but to end the limitless expansion of global inequality and better regulate the global financial system. Yet Piketty is not naïve enough to think that international agreement is remotely close or that the wealthiest would comply willingly. His argument is that, however difficult or fanciful it sounds, only by tackling the increasing concentration of wealth can potentially disastrous social conflict be avoided. Despite being widely perceived as radical, Piketty's proposals may be seen as an attempt to save capitalism from exactly the kind of social uprising that Marx envisaged almost two centuries ago.

Global inequality

Sociologists have long focused on inequalities of class, status and power within the developed industrial capitalist societies, but the issues of class, status and power also exist on a larger scale at the global level. Just as we can speak of the rich and poor, high and low status, or powerful and powerless within a single country, we can also see these within the global system as a whole. In the rest of this chapter, we look at global inequality in the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century (see chapter 4 for globalization in a longer time frame).

Economic inequality is a major source of the world's problems of poverty, hunger and poor health, and for that reason it forms the central focus of this chapter. However, as we saw in chapter 3, there are also major inequalities of social status, including epistemic inequality (Connell 2007) – the devaluing of knowledge produced in developing countries – and global inequalities of power, both within and between nation-states, which remains an important source of many entrenched conflicts, some of which are discussed in chapter 21, 'Nations, War and Terrorism'. For a broader analysis of inequalities of status and power, readers should consult the chapters identified above.

Global economic inequality refers primarily to systematic differences in wealth, incomes and working conditions that exist *between* countries. The challenge for social scientists is not merely to identify such differences but to explain *why* they occur and what consequences follow from these. First, though, we must clarify some key terms from the literature in this area.

Discourses of global inequality

The accepted language of development and global inequality is contentious and has changed several times over the past 100 years or so. Until the late twentieth century, a three worlds model was commonplace, with first, second and third worlds embodying the idea that each 'world' was relatively distinct.

In the post-1945 period, colonial empires began to collapse as colonized countries struggled for national independence. The Cold War between East and West also began to take hold, and many nation-states became aligned with or allied to one of the two emerging 'superpowers' – the Soviet Union or the USA. The concept of a 'Third World' originated in the [Non-Aligned Movement](https://...) (NAM), a group of countries which declared themselves not aligned to either superpower. Instead, at a conference in Bandung in 1955, twenty-nine heads of state agreed to work together to decolonize Africa and Asia and to promote the right to national self-determination. In this way 'Third World', or 'third way', was a positive way of describing the postcolonial, non-aligned project.

However, over time, and particularly following the end of the Cold War around 1990–1, this political concept lost ground. 'Third World' came increasingly to be used in academic studies as part of a basic classification scheme consisting of a high-income First World, a middle-income Second World and a low-income Third World. There are two main problems with this typology. First, it is now recognized that there exists a global level of reality encompassing all the world's societies. In a globalizing world, the first, second and third worlds are tightly interconnected, and it is not possible to grasp the situation in one 'world' without understanding its position in the wider global system. Second, labelling relatively rich countries as the 'First World' is widely seen as a Eurocentric value judgement which stigmatizes the 'Third World' as a large, underdeveloped and economically stagnant region. This characterization tends to 'blame the victims', portraying the people and governments of developing countries as responsible for their situation. As we shall see later, the Eurocentric three worlds model took no account of the impact of colonialism or the exploitation by Western multinational corporations of 'Third World' natural and human resources.

Because of flaws in the three worlds model, social scientists began to discuss the world as divided into 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' societies. Developed societies are those that, broadly defined, lie in the northern hemisphere and the underdeveloped societies are in the southern hemisphere. Most sociologists have dropped the concept of 'underdeveloped' countries, which again gave the impression of

economic backwardness, and have replaced this with 'developing countries'. The latter is a more dynamic concept, implying movement and ongoing economic change rather than an unchangeable condition of underdevelopment. The exceptions are scholars working within the political economy tradition, who link underdevelopment in the South to development in the North. That is, the rich countries are seen as actively *underdeveloping* the countries of the global South and creating dependency so that Western capitalism can continue to expand. This perspective is discussed in more detail later.

The concept and practices of sustainable development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are discussed in chapter 5, 'The Environment'. Taken together chapters 5 and 6 offer a detailed account of economic, social and sustainable forms of development.

Yet even this move remains too close to Western ideas of what economic development actually entails. Some recent scholarship has adopted the term majority world to describe (broadly) the relatively poor countries of the southern hemisphere and minority world for the relatively wealthy countries of the North (Dodds 2018: 8). One benefit of this conceptualization is that it reminds us that a small number of countries encompassing a minority of the global population enjoy comfortable lifestyles, while the majority of the world's people still live in relatively poor conditions that severely reduce life chances. On the other hand, it gives little impression of the economic situations across the world's regions.

As we are concerned primarily (though not exclusively) with economic inequality, in this chapter we will use 'developed' to refer mainly to those countries that have arrived at a relatively high level of income and economic development and 'developing' when discussing those countries that have a lower level of income but are in the process of development. In this way, 'developing countries' includes many 'second'

and all 'third' world countries on the older model, though the discussion will draw on national case studies making clear which regions and countries are being referred to. Whichever concepts are used, it is important to understand how the very different economic situations in countries around the world fit into these classification schemes.

[Measuring economic inequality](#)

How should economic inequality across countries be measured? One widely used method is to compare their economic productivity. An important measure of productivity is a country's [gross domestic product](#) (GDP), which covers all the goods and services on record as being produced in a particular year. Income earned abroad by individuals or corporations is not included. An alternative is [gross national income](#) (GNI). Unlike GDP, GNI also takes in income earned by individuals or corporations outside the country. Measures of economic activity, such as GDP or GNI, are often listed per person (per capita), which allows us to compare the average wealth of the inhabitants of a range of countries. In order to carry out this comparison, we also need to use a common currency, and most international bodies, such as the World Bank and the United Nations, use the US dollar (US$ or USD).

The World Bank is an international lending organization that provides loans for development projects in poorer countries. It uses GNI per capita to classify countries as high income, upper middle income, lower middle income or low income. This fourfold classification will help us, but, for the sake of simplicity, we will usually merge the upper-middle and lower-middle categories into one category of 'middle income'.

The World Bank (2018a) divides 218 countries into the three economic classes. In 2018, countries with a GNI per capita of $995 or less per annum in 2017 were classified as 'low income', those between $996 and $12,055 were 'middle income', and those with a GNI of $12,056 or more per capita were labelled 'high income'. This classification system is based on *average income* for each country and tells us nothing about income inequality *within* each country. This can be significant, though our main focus in this chapter is not on intra-country inequalities. For

example, the World Bank reclassified India from a low-income to a lower-middle-income country after its GNI per capita more than doubled between 1999 and 2009 (World Bank 2011a: 11). Yet, despite India's large and growing middle class, many people still live in poverty. Similarly, China was reclassified from low to middle income in 1999, but the benefits of rapid economic development have not been shared equally across its population.

Comparing countries on the basis of income alone may mislead, since GNI takes account only of goods and services produced for cash sale. Many people in low-income countries are farmers and herders who produce for their own families or for barter involving non-cash transactions, and these transactions are not taken into account. Countries also possess unique and widely differing languages and traditions. Poor countries are no less rich in history and culture than their wealthier neighbours, even though the lives of their people may be more difficult. Social and cultural assets such as social solidarity, strong cultural traditions, or systems of familial and community assistance are hard to measure statistically.

Many environmental campaigners have argued that GDP and GNI are blunt quantitative measures that tell us nothing about the *quality* of life. Even those economic activities that damage the natural environment are counted as part of a country's total economic output, contributing to economic well-being. From the perspective of long-term environmental sustainability, this method is irrational. If we took account of some of the social and cultural aspects of life noted above, we may arrive at a radically different view of the apparent benefits of pursuing continuous increases in GDP/GNI.

Even if we do compare countries solely on the basis of economic statistics, the statistics we choose for our comparisons are likely to make a difference to our conclusions. For example, if we choose to study global inequality by comparing levels of household consumption (food, medicine or other products) rather than GNI, we might reach a different conclusion. Similarly, a comparison of GNI does not take into account how much things *actually* cost. If two countries have a more or less equal GNI per capita but, in the first, an average family meal costs a few pence, whereas in the second it costs several pounds, it may be

misleading to argue that the countries are equally wealthy. Instead, researchers tend to use *purchasing power parities* (PPP), which eliminate the difference in prices between the two countries. In this chapter we generally use comparisons of GNI between countries, but both GDP and PPPs are included where necessary.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Measures of 'average income' are useful measures. Of what? Which aspects of life are likely to be missed by this approach? What else could sociologists do to build a more rounded picture of the lives of people in very different societies?

Low-income countries

Low-income countries take in much of eastern, western and sub-Saharan Africa but also include North Korea and, following the recent conflict, Syria. In 2018 there were thirty-four low-income countries, a fall of almost 50 per cent since 2003. Low-income countries account for just 10 per cent of the global population today, and many have mainly agricultural economies. Yet, as the cases of Cambodia, Pakistan, India and China show, average income levels are rising in many previously low-income countries and regions as they integrate into the global economic system.

Fertility rates tend to be higher in low-income countries than elsewhere, as large families provide additional labour or otherwise contribute to family income. In wealthy industrial societies, where children are more likely to be in school than working, the economic benefit of large families declines and people have fewer children. Because of this, in the early twenty-first century the populations of low-income countries grew more than three times as fast as those of the high-income countries (World Bank 2004).

High-income countries

The *high-income countries* are generally those that were first to industrialize, starting with the UK some 250 years ago and spreading outwards to Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. Just

over forty years ago, Japan joined the ranks of high-income nations, with Singapore, Hong Kong and Taiwan moving into this category in the 1980s and 1990s. The reasons for the success of these Asian latecomers are much debated by sociologists and economists, and we will look at these debates later.

Eighty-one countries were in the high-income category in 2018, almost 37 per cent of the World Bank classification. High-income countries offer good housing, adequate food, safe water supplies and other comforts unknown in many other parts of the world. Only 17 per cent of the global population live in high-income countries (World Bank 2018a). Although these countries still have much internal inequality, most of their inhabitants enjoy a standard of living far beyond that of the majority of the global population.

Middle-income countries

The *middle-income countries* are found primarily in East and South-East Asia, the oil-rich countries of the Middle East and North Africa, South Africa, the Americas (Mexico, Central America, Cuba and other countries in the Caribbean, and South America) and the former communist republics of the Soviet Union and its Eastern European allies. Most of the 107 middle-income countries in the 2019 World Bank classification began to industrialize relatively late, in the latter part of the twentieth century.

Although many people in middle-income countries, especially the 'upper-middle-income' group, are substantially better off than neighbours in low-income countries, most do not enjoy the higher material standard of living of the high-income countries. The ranks of the world's middle-income countries expanded significantly when China and India were reclassified from low to middle income as a result of their rapid economic growth. This means that living in a middle-income country is now the global norm, encompassing 73 per cent of the world's population (World Bank 2018a).

Inequality and human development

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) created and developed a multidimensional tool, the Human Development Index (HDI), which combines a range of economic and non-economic indicators to give an overall picture of 'human development' around the world. The HDI covers three main dimensions – health, education and living standards – using four indicators – life expectancy at birth, mean years of schooling, expected years of schooling and GNI per capita (figure 6.2). In 2010 three new indicators were added, taking account of the impact of social inequality, gender inequality and a multidimensional index of poverty. UNDP reports provide a very useful series of analyses which allow for comparisons over time, allowing us to see how the regions and countries of the world are faring.

An enormous gulf in living standards separates most people in the rich countries from their counterparts in poor ones. Wealth and poverty produce very different outcomes and life chances in a host of ways. For instance, *Source*: UNDP (2010: 13). about one-third of the world's poor are undernourished and almost all are illiterate, lacking access to basic primary-school education. There is a gender dimension here, as educating girls has traditionally been seen as unnecessary or secondary to the education of boys. Yet conditions of life have undoubtedly been improving in most countries and in all regions of the world since 1990, including the low-income countries (Figure 6.3).
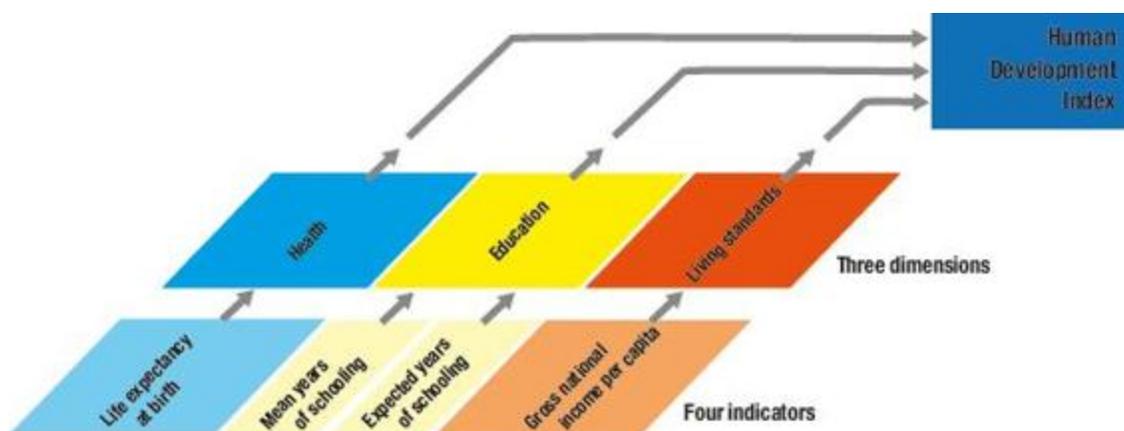
Figure 6.2 Components of the Human Development Index

Between 1990 and 2015 the mortality rate for the under-fives fell from ninety-one to forty-three per 1,000 live births, and between 1990 and 2005 there was an increase in the proportion of births attended by

medical personnel, up from 47 to 59 per cent (UNDP 2016: 3; UNDP 2014). UNDP (2016) also reports that another 2.6 billion people have improved access to drinking water, more than 2 billion have better sanitation, and the incidence of serious diseases such as malaria, HIV and tuberculosis has also declined significantly since the early 1990s.
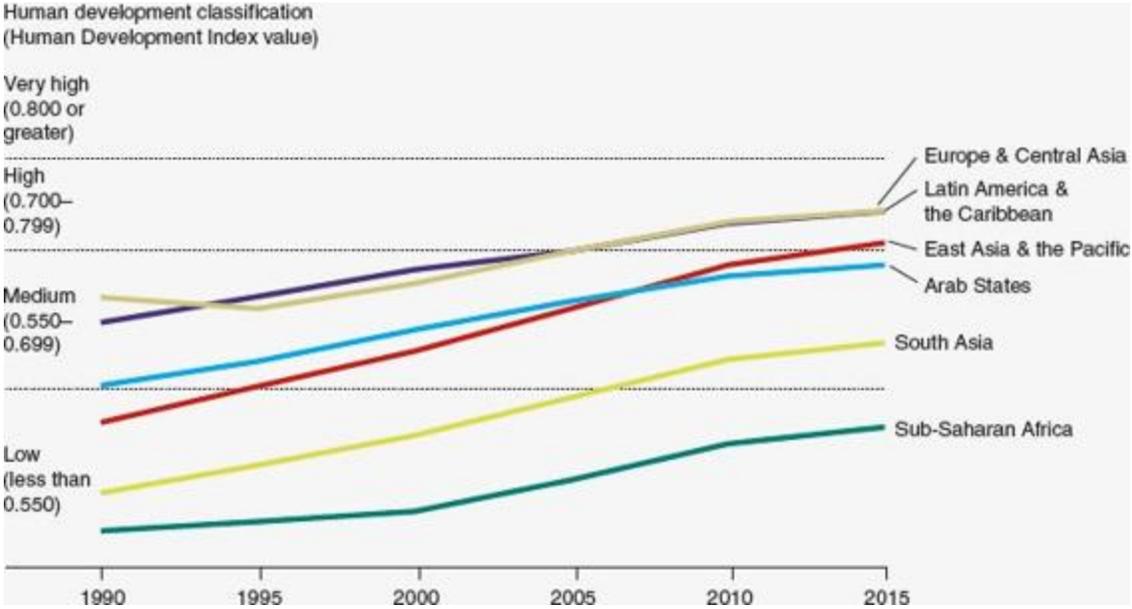
Figure 6.3 Regional trends in Human Development Index values, 1990–2015

Source: UNDP (2016: 27).
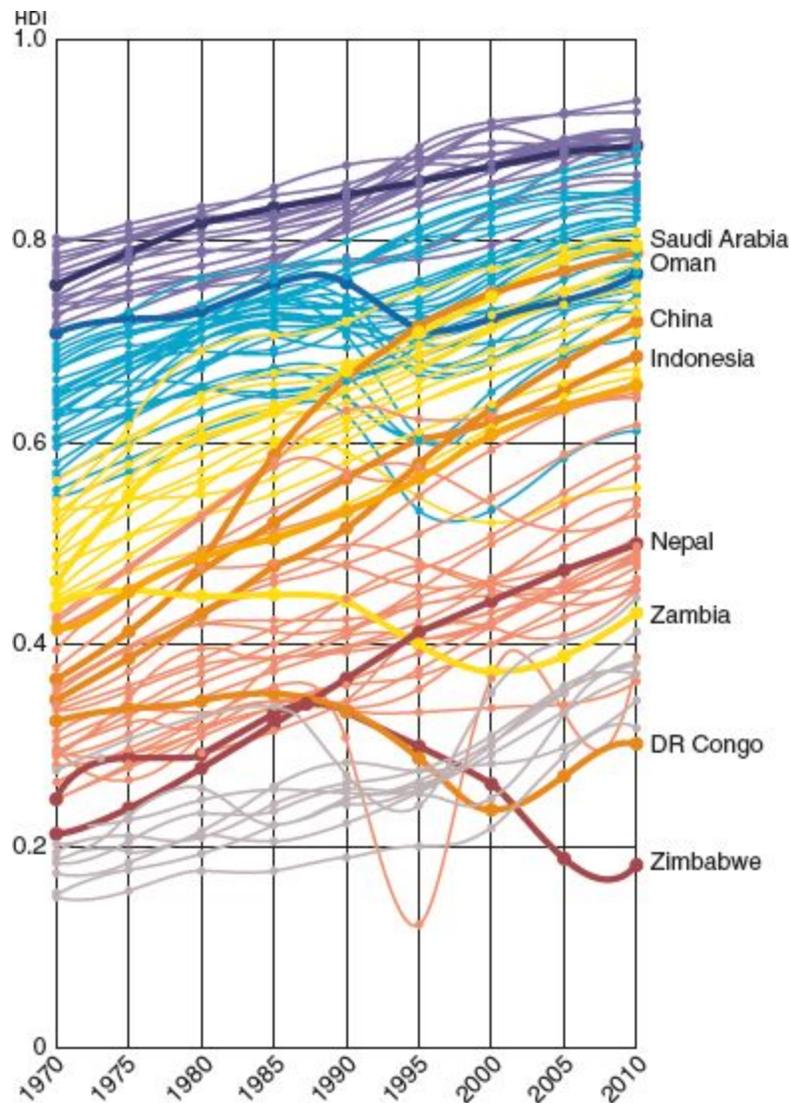
Figure 6.4 National trends in the HDI, selected countries, 1970–2010

Note: Top movers are Oman, China, Nepal, Indonesia and Saudi Arabia. Bottom movers are the DR Congo, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Source: Adapted from UNDP (2010: 27).

Since the first *Human Development Report* in 1990, these reports have consistently argued that there is no 'automatic link' between economic growth and human progress. What is more significant is how the benefits of economic growth are used by governments and shared across national populations. In general, between 1970 and 2010 there was progress in HDI measures across all regions of the world, though not in all countries. East Asia showed the fastest progress, followed by South Asia and the Arab states.

Of the 135 countries in the comparison, only three – the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Zambia and Zimbabwe – had a lower HDI in 2010 than in 1970. Figure 6.4 traces a selection of these 135 countries from their original score in 1970. Oman (an oil-rich state) made the most progress, followed by China, Nepal and Indonesia. Ethiopia was eleventh on the list of countries with the fastest development, despite having the fourteenth *lowest* GNI per capita, illustrating that a broader definition of 'development' produces different outcomes compared to purely economic measures. Among the top ten performing countries – Oman, China, Nepal, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Tunisia, South Korea, Algeria and Morocco – only China's overall HDI score was mainly the result of progress in economic growth as measured in GNI per capita.

Progress made in human development means that life in developing countries today is generally 'more similar' to life in the developed countries than it was in 1970. But the gross inequality of life conditions in 1970 means that this progress is relative, and global inequality remains the most striking feature of international comparisons. As we have seen earlier, global wealth has been increasing but is unequally distributed, with 50 per cent of the increase since 2000 going to the richest 10 per cent and just 1 per cent finding its way to the poorest 50 per cent (UNDP 2016: 31). In spite of a progressive general trend in human development across all regions, the process of developing countries 'catching up' with the developed world still seems very far off.

Unequal life chances

Sociologists have long studied the ways that inequalities of class, ethnicity and gender affect the overall life chances of individuals. Being born male or female, working class or middle class, or a member of an ethnic majority or minority group can shape how healthy we are, what level of education we will reach, or the kind of work we can expect to do. Although it is clear that progress is being made on almost all aspects of human development, it is important to grasp the sheer scale of the global development challenge.

As [figure 6.5](#) shows, despite all of the improvements made since 1990, between 2014 and 2016 there were still almost 800 million people in the world living in chronic hunger, 758 million illiterate adults, 2.4 billion people without access to proper sanitation, and 663 million without access to a reliable, safe water supply. In this section we briefly outline some key inequalities in relation to health, nutrition and education, as well as looking at the continuing use of child labour.
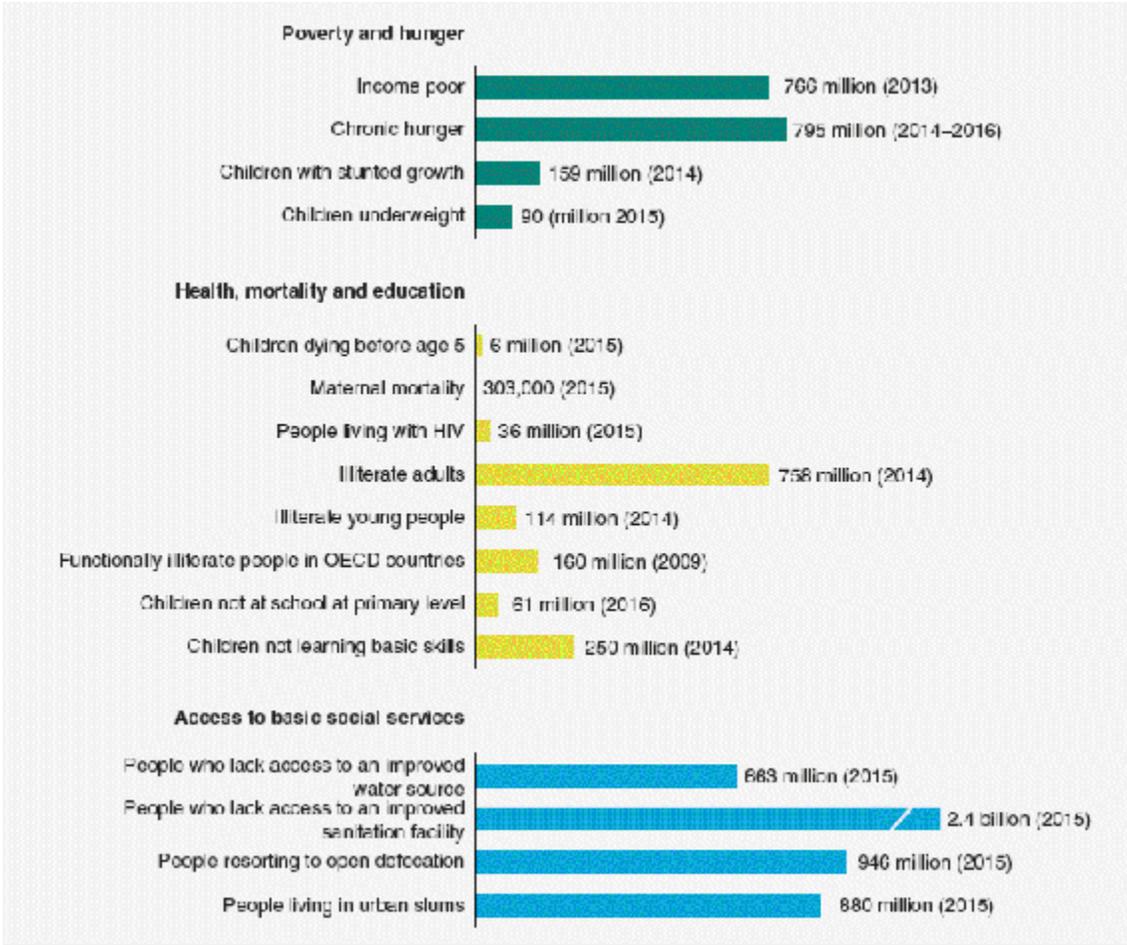

Figure 6.5 Indicators of continuing human deprivation, 2016

Source: UNDP (2016: 30).

Health

People in high-income countries are generally healthier than their counterparts in low-income countries. Low-income countries generally suffer from inadequate health facilities, and where these exist they

seldom serve the poorest people. Those living in low-income countries often lack proper sanitation, put up with polluted water and run greater risk of contracting infectious diseases. They are more likely to suffer malnourishment, starvation and famine. These factors all contribute to physical weakness and poor health, making people in low-income countries susceptible to illness and disease. Continuing high rates of HIV/AIDS infection in some African countries are due, in part, to the weakened health of impoverished people (Stillwaggon 2000). The HIV/AIDS epidemic had a dramatic impact on the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where HIV prevalence rates remain high and life expectancy in the worst affected countries is around fifty-one years – roughly the same as in the UK before the Industrial Revolution.

Between 1970 and 1990, health conditions improved across the world, and by 2010 life expectancy even for people in the poorest region of the world – sub-Saharan Africa – had risen by an additional eight years from that in 1970. Yet, in 2010, there were still eight times more infant deaths per 1,000 live births in developing countries than in developed ones, and less than 1 per cent of all child deaths are in the developed world (UNDP 2010: 32). Maternal mortality rates have also improved, though at a much slower pace, and the rate of progress has slowed since 1990.

Improving healthcare provision and vaccination coverage is helping to reduce infant mortality. For instance, the two doses required of measles vaccine reached 53 per cent of people globally, much higher than the 15 per cent in 2000. As a result, cases of measles fell by 67 per cent over the period and an estimated 15.6 million lives were saved (UNDP 2016: 27). Alongside the improving sanitation facilities and clean water supplies needed to reduce diseases such as cholera, there is an improving global health trend, even though this is uneven.

Around 3 million children die each year from hunger, and undernourishment is a further contributing factor to at least half of child deaths globally.

Hunger, malnutrition and famine

Developed countries are awash with food, as a visit to any large supermarket will attest. But one in every nine people in the world today is undernourished and unable to lead a healthy and active life. Undernourishment is a longstanding issue rather than an acute new problem, but the extent of hunger and undernourishment is more recent. The United Nations World Food Programme (2001) defines 'hunger' as a diet of 1,800 or fewer calories per day – an amount insufficient for adults to stay healthy. The number of malnourished people globally has remained quite stable since 1980, hovering around 800 million (UNDP 2010).
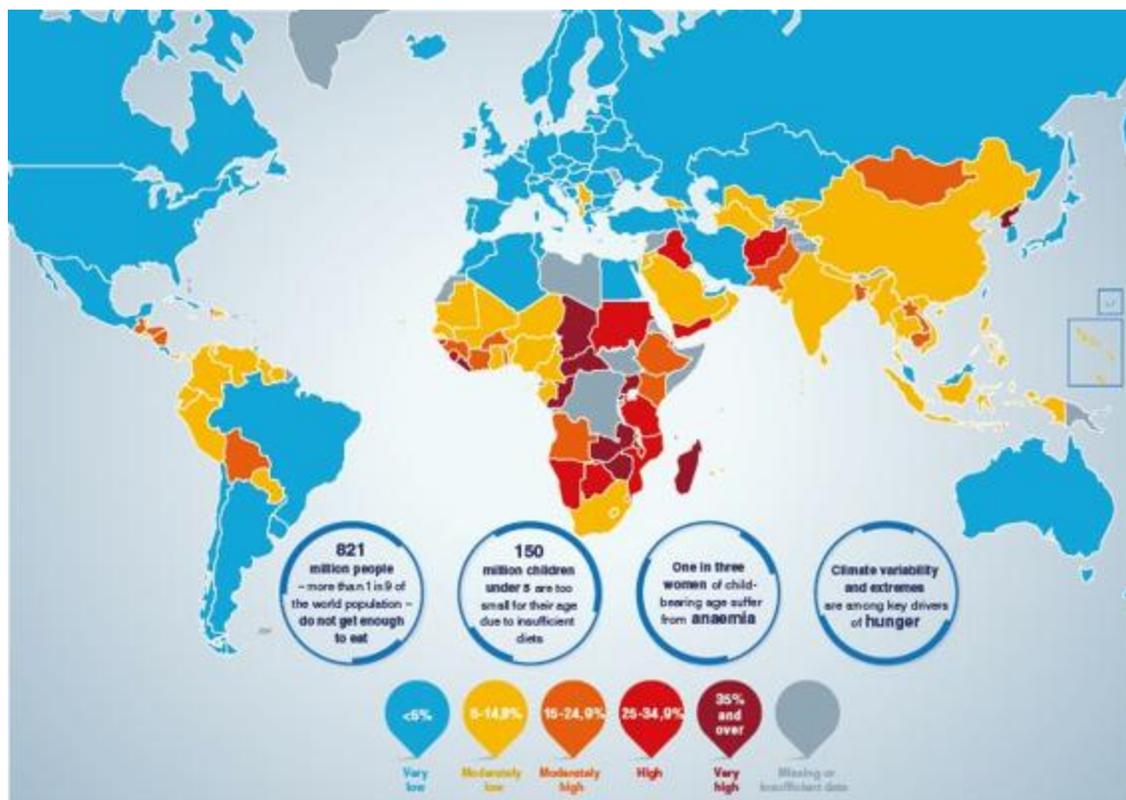

Figure 6.6 World Hunger Map, 2018

Source: World Food Programme (2018).

As Figure 6.6 illustrates, undernourishment rates are highest in much of Africa as well as in sites of recent conflicts, such as Yemen, Iraq and Afghanistan. Food crises, in which urgent assistance is needed, affected over 100 million people in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019. There are

several causes of food crisis, including floods, drought and other climate events, wars and conflict, or an acute economic downturn. Drought alone affects around 100 million people. In countries such as Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Indonesia, Afghanistan, Sierra Leone, Guinea and Tajikistan, the combination of drought and internal warfare devastated food production, resulting in starvation and death for millions of people. Over half of those involved in a food crisis in 2018 were in countries affected by conflict and insecurity (FSIN 2019: 15). In Latin America and the Caribbean at the start of the twenty-first century, 53 million people (11 per cent of the population) were malnourished, along with 180 million (33 per cent) in sub-Saharan Africa and 525 million (17 per cent) in Asia (World Food Programme 2001).

In the developed countries, it is not too little but, rather, too much food that has become a problem, as obesity rates have grown to be an increasing cause for concern. Indeed, some experts suggest that, in the USA, life expectancy may begin to fall by 2050 on account of obesityrelated health problems such as diabetes, strokes and cardiovascular disease (Olshansky et al. 2005). The contrast in life chances and living conditions between high-income and low-income countries is nowhere more stark than in this basic issue of getting enough food to survive and thrive.

Low-income countries affected by famine and starvation are, for the most part, unable to afford new technologies that would increase their food production. Nor can they afford to purchase sufficient food imports from elsewhere in the world. Climate change threatens to bring more of the world's poor into food crisis, as drought, floods and heatwaves tend to impact on those agricultural and subsistence economies that rely heavily on natural resources. The UNDP estimates that, unless measures are taken to mitigate such risks, food production is likely to decrease and, by 2030, 100 million additional people will live in poverty (UNDP 2016: 39).

[Education, literacy and child labour](#)

Education not only contributes to economic growth, it also offers hope for many of escaping the cycle of harsh working conditions and poverty,

since poorly educated people fill the low-wage, unskilled jobs. Educated people are also likely to have fewer children, thus slowing down global population growth. Developing countries are disadvantaged again, since they can seldom afford high-quality public education provision. As a consequence, children in developed countries are much more likely to get schooling than children in developing countries, and adults in high-income countries are far more likely to be able to read and write.

Nevertheless, there has been much improvement in education provision and enrolment since the 1980s. Primary-school enrolment has become the norm in both developed and developing countries since around 1990, and the global proportion of people who received some form of education rose from 57 per cent in 1960 to 85 per cent by 2010. Levels of youth literacy also rose to more than 95 per cent in developing countries as a result of increases in the average length of years at school (UNDP 2010). We might expect that, as a result, illiteracy will become far less of a problem for developing countries and individuals in the future. However, in 2018, despite four years in school, one-third of primary school-age children could not read or do basic maths. Similarly, primary education enrolment of girls has increased, but many adult women with four to six years of schooling still do not read or write. This is partly the result of high pupil–teacher ratios, not enough trained teachers and inadequate support (UNDP 2016: 67–8).

Disparities in education result from relatively low levels of education spending. For instance, in 2010, the average education spend per pupil was forty times higher in developed countries than in sub-Saharan Africa. There is also a significant gender gap in primary-school enrolment. Of the 156 countries surveyed for the HDI report in 2010, only eighty-seven had comparable primary-school enrolments for girls and boys. In rural areas of some developing countries, the gender gap for secondary-age children is striking. In Bolivia and Guinea, for example, only around 35 per cent of older rural girls were enrolled, compared with 71 per cent and 84 per cent, respectively, of urban boys (UNDP 2010: 36–8). While virtually all secondary school-aged males and females in the developed world were in full-time education in 2007, only 64 per cent of children in developing countries enjoyed this

benefit. In tertiary education the situation is even more unequal, though the overall direction of travel is upwards (see figure 6.7).

A major cause of the low levels of young people in secondary and tertiary education in developing countries is their expected involvement in work. Children work through a combination of family poverty, lack of education provision, and traditional indifference to the plight of poor and minority ethnic groups (UNICEF 2000). Child labour has been legally outlawed in the high-income countries, but it still exists in many parts of the world. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) there were about 152 million child labourers between the ages of five and seventeen in 2016, a significant reduction of some 70 million since 2004. Around 73 million of these children were still working in hazardous conditions (ILO 2017b: 5; 2010: v). The highest incidence of child labour is in sub-Saharan Africa and the largest number of child workers is found in the Asia-Pacific region.
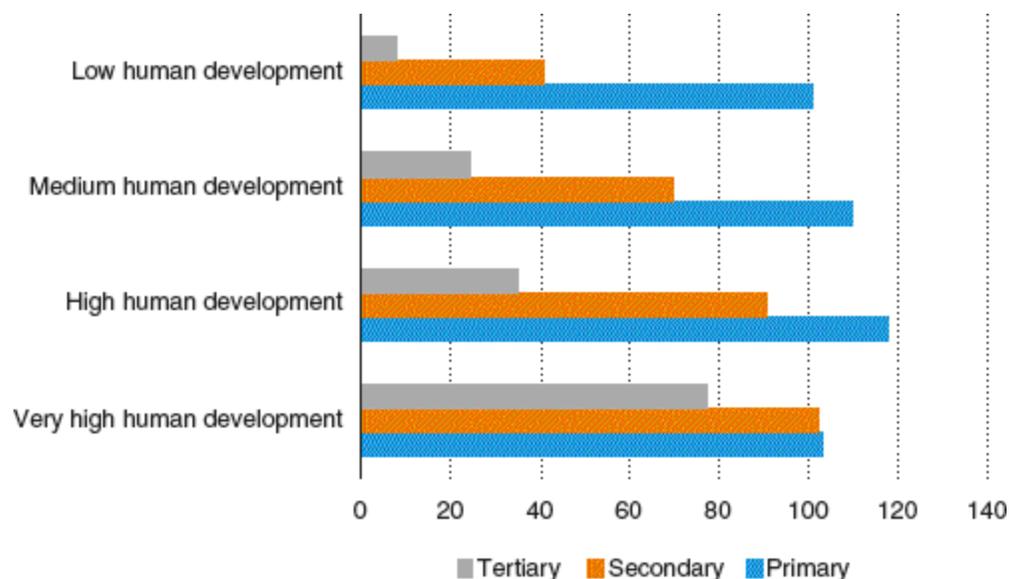
Figure 6.7 Gross enrolment ratios by level of education and human development index, 2015

Note: Ratios can exceed 100 per cent where enrolment is of students who are not of school age (on account of late entry or repeat study).

Source: UNDP (2015: 245).

Some 68 per cent of child labourers in 2008 were involved in unpaid family labour, 21 per cent were in paid employment, and 5 per cent were self-employed; 60 per cent worked in agriculture, 7 per cent in

industry, and 26 per cent in services, such as restaurants and hotels, and as servants in wealthy households (ILO 2010). At best, these children work long hours with little pay and are unable to go to school and develop the skills that might eventually enable them to escape their lives of poverty. However, simply enforcing an immediate ban on all child labour, even if it were possible, might be counter-productive. Child labour is a better alternative to child prostitution or chronic undernourishment, for example. The challenge is not just to end child labour but also to move children from work into education and to ensure that they are properly provided for during their school years.

Global society 6.1 Child labour in agriculture

Instead of attending school, millions of girls and boys in rural areas worldwide are child labourers. They are everywhere, but often hidden, on farms, on fishing boats, in plantations, in mountain areas, herding livestock or toiling as domestic servants. Child labour perpetuates a cycle of poverty for the children involved, their families and communities. Without education, these rural boys and girls are likely to be the poor of tomorrow. Policies must address the root causes of child labour and promote decent work for adults in rural areas.

The vast majority of the world's child labourers are not toiling in factories and sweatshops [cramped workshops where manual workers do long hours for very low pay, often with employers breaking labour laws] or working as domestics or street vendors in urban areas; they are working on farms and plantations, often from sun up to sun down, planting and harvesting crops, spraying pesticides, and tending livestock on rural farms and plantations. These children play an important role in crop and livestock production, helping supply some of the food and drink we consume and the fibres and raw materials we use to make other products. Examples include cocoa/chocolate, coffee, tea, sugar, fruits and vegetables, along with other agricultural products like tobacco and cotton.
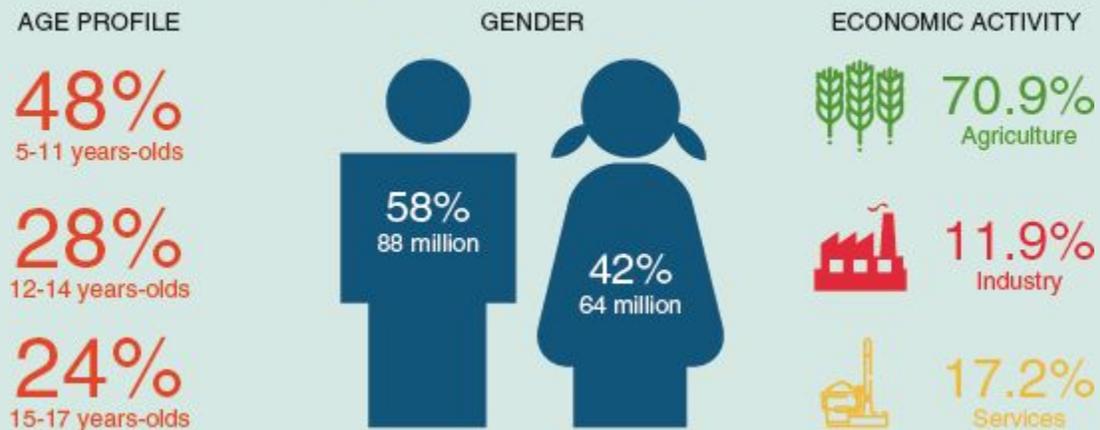
OF THE 152 MILLION CHILDREN IN CHILD LABOUR

AGE PROFILE

48%
5-11 years-olds

28%
12-14 years-olds

24%
15-17 years-olds

GENDER

58%
88 million

42%
64 million

ECONOMIC ACTIVITY

70.9%
Agriculture

11.9%
Industry

17.2%
Services

Figure 6.8 Global child labour by age, gender and economic sector

Source: ILO (2017b: 5).

Around 70 million of these girls and boys carry out 'hazardous child labour', which is work that can threaten their lives, limbs, health, and general well-being. Irrespective of age, agriculture – along with construction and mining – is one of the three most dangerous sectors in which to work in terms of work-related fatalities, non-fatal accidents and occupational disease. Bangladesh is a primarily rural country and for many children working to help grow, harvest, transport or sell farm products is a normal, everyday role from the earliest days of childhood. They are regularly exposed to farm machinery and tools that often result in devastating injuries. About 50 children a day are injured by machines, and three of them are injured so severely that they become permanently disabled.

Child labourers are susceptible to all the hazards and risks faced by adult workers when placed in the same situation. They are at even greater risk from these dangers because their bodies are still growing and their minds and personalities still developing, and they lack work experience. So the effects of poor to non-existent safety and health protection can often be more devastating and lasting for them. Also, a feature of agriculture that sets it apart from most other forms of child labour is that the children usually live on the farms or plantations where they work. This exposes them to additional risks.

Source: Selections from ILO (2007b, 2011b) and FAO/IFAD/ILO (2010).

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> Does child labour still exist in the developed countries? If so, what types of work do these children do? Given the ILO age range of five to seventeen years, should *all* child labour in all countries be banned? What negative, unintended consequences for poor families might follow?

International organizations such as the ILO have outlined a set of standards for such laws to follow. In June 1999 the ILO adopted Convention 182 calling for the abolition of the 'worst forms of child labour', including slavery, the sale and trafficking of children, forced labour, prostitution, pornography, drugs trafficking and work that harms the health, safety or morals of children (ILO 1999). Part of the solution also lies with the global corporations manufacturing goods using child labour, trade unions that organize the workforce, agricultural cooperatives whose values are opposed to child labour, and, ultimately, the consumers who buy the goods. ILO statistics show a reduction of more than 90 million child labourers in 2017 compared with 2000, but also that the pace of change is slowing down (ILO 2017b). As others have argued, 'development' is a dynamic process which, if it fails to maintain a forward momentum, is just as likely to go into reverse.

The changing human population

In mid-2017 the UN estimated that the global human population was almost 7.6 billion, a rise of 1.6 billion since 1999. The global population has more than doubled since 1965. In the 1960s, Paul Ehrlich calculated that, if the 1960s rate of population growth were to continue, in 900 years' time there would be 60,000,000,000,000,000 (60 quadrillion) people on the face of the Earth, a number most of us can hardly grasp. Could it really happen?

Catastrophist predictions of global population have proved to be inaccurate. In the 1960s and 1970s, estimates suggested a population of around 8 billion people by 2000, but in fact the figure was significantly lower, at just over 6 billion. Today the UN's 'medium variant' forecast (between the extremes of low and high) is that there will be 9.3 billion people on the planet by 2050, with most of the increase coming from high fertility rates in thirty-nine countries in Africa, nine in Asia, six in Oceania and four in Latin America (UN 2011). In low-fertility countries (including Japan, China, the Russian Federation and Brazil) the number of people is forecast to reach a peak by 2030, after which it will gradually fall. By 2100, the population of the low-fertility countries should be 20 per cent lower than it is today. The population of intermediate-fertility countries (such as the USA, India, Bangladesh and Indonesia) is forecast to peak by 2065, leaving only that of the high-fertility group still increasing by 2100 (ibid.: 1–2).

On the latest UN forecast, global population growth should be tailing offby 2100, perhaps leading to a reduction in the twenty-second century. Nevertheless, the rapid increase in the human population, from about 1 billion early in the nineteenth century to approaching 8 billion today, is still quite staggering. Is this level sustainable? Can 8 billion people be adequately fed and housed, or are large sections to be condemned to a life of poverty? What would the spread of Western consumerist lifestyles to the global population mean for the condition of the natural environment? Small changes in fertility levels can have very large consequences, and it is not inconceivable that a higher

variant forecast could prove more accurate. If so, then these questions would become even more urgent.

Population analysis: demography

Global poverty and population growth are tied together, for it is in some of the world's poorest countries that population growth is greatest. Understanding population movements is important for social and environmental scientists, policy-makers and politicians seeking to understand the prospects for social life in the future. To do this we must draw on research from the field of demography, the study of population.

Population studies can be traced to the late seventeenth century, when scholars became interested in birth and death rates, though modern demography really took offwith the development of national censuses in European societies in the nineteenth century. Demography is concerned with measuring the size of populations and explaining their rise and decline. Population patterns are governed by three factors: births, deaths and migration. Demography is often seen as a branch of sociology because the factors that influence the level of births, deaths and migration are largely social and cultural.

Demographic work tends to be statistical in orientation, and every developed country gathers basic population statistics to monitor the population. Rigorous as the modes of data collection now are, demographic statistics are never wholly accurate. In the UK, there has been a population census every ten years since 1801. The census aims to be as accurate as possible, though some people – illegal immigrants, homeless people, transient workers and others – are not registered in the official statistics. In many developing countries, particularly those with recent high rates of population growth, demographic statistics are less reliable.

Dynamics of population change

Population growth and decline rates are measured by subtracting the number of deaths per 1,000 from the number of births per 1,000, usually calculated annually. Rates of population growth in the

industrializing countries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were high, but today they are much lower. For example, in 2018 the growth rate in the European Union was just 0.2 per cent and in North America 0.7 per cent. By contrast, in sub-Saharan Africa the growth rate was 2.7 per cent and in the Middle East and North Africa it was 1.7 per cent (World Bank 2019). These various rates may not appear to be very far apart, but, in fact, the consequences can be significant.

The reason for this is that growth in population is exponential. Starting with one item and doubling it, doubling the result, and so on, rapidly leads to huge numbers – 1:2:4:8:16:32:64:128, and so on. Exactly the same principle applies to population growth, and we can measure this effect by the doubling time – the period it takes for the population to double in size. A population growth of 1 per cent will produce a doubling of numbers in seventy years. At 2 per cent growth, a population will double in thirty-five years, while at 3 per cent it will double in just twenty-three years. It took the whole of human history until just after 1800 for the global population to reach 1 billion. By 1930 it doubled to 2 billion, by 1975 (just forty-five years) it had doubled again, to 4 billion. By 2017 it reached 7.6 billion, and it is forecast to rise to 8.3 billion by 2030 (UN DESA 2017: 1).

Malthusian concerns

Before modern industrialization, birth rates were very high by today's standards, but the population growth rate remained low because there was a rough balance between births and deaths. The general trend was upward and there were periods of sharp population increase, but these were followed by increases in death rates. In medieval Europe, when harvests were bad, marriages tended to be postponed and the number of conceptions fell, while deaths increased. No society was able to escape from this self-regulating rhythm (Wrigley 1968).

With large-scale industrialism, many looked forward to a new age in which scarcity would be eliminated. But, in his celebrated *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1976 [1798]), Thomas Malthus broke with this assumption, initiating a debate about the connection between population and food resources that continues even today. In 1798 the population in Europe was growing rapidly, and Malthus pointed out

that, while population increase is exponential, food supply depends on fixed resources that can be expanded only by developing more land. Population growth therefore tends to outstrip the means to support it, and the inevitable outcome is famine, which, combined with the influence of war and disease, acts as a natural limit on runaway population increase. Malthus predicted that, unless they practised 'moral restraint', human beings would always live in circumstances of misery and starvation. His solution was to limit human reproduction.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

6.1 Demography – the key concepts

Among the basic concepts used by demographers, the most important are crude birth rates, fertility, fecundity and crude death rates. Crude birth rates are expressed as the number of live births per year per 1,000 of the population. They are called 'crude' rates because of their very general character. They do not, for example, tell us what proportion of a population is male or female or what the age distribution is (the relative proportions of young and old people). Where statistics are collected that relate birth or death rates to such categories, demographers speak of 'specific' rather than 'crude' rates. For instance, an age-specific birth rate might specify the number of births per 1,000 women in different age groups.

If we wish to understand population patterns in any detail, the information provided by specific birth rates is normally necessary. Crude birth rates, however, are useful for making overall comparisons between different groups, societies and regions. Thus, in 2006 the crude birth rate in Australia was 12.4 (per year, per 1,000 population), in Nicaragua 24.9, in Mozambique 39.5 and, highest of all, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo it was 49.6 (UN 2006). The industrialized countries tend to have low rates, while, in many other parts of the world, crude birth rates are much higher.

Birth rates are an expression of the fertility of women. Fertility refers to how many live-born children the average woman has, and a fertility rate is usually calculated as the average number of births per 1,000 women of childbearing age (figure 6.9). Fertility is distinguished from fecundity, which means the potential number of children women are biologically capable of bearing. It is physically possible for a woman to bear a child every year during the period when she is capable of conception. There are variations in fecundity

according to the age at which women reach puberty and menopause, both of which differ among countries as well as among individuals. While there may be families in which a woman bears twenty or more children, because of limiting social and cultural factors, fertility rates in practice are always much lower than fecundity rates.
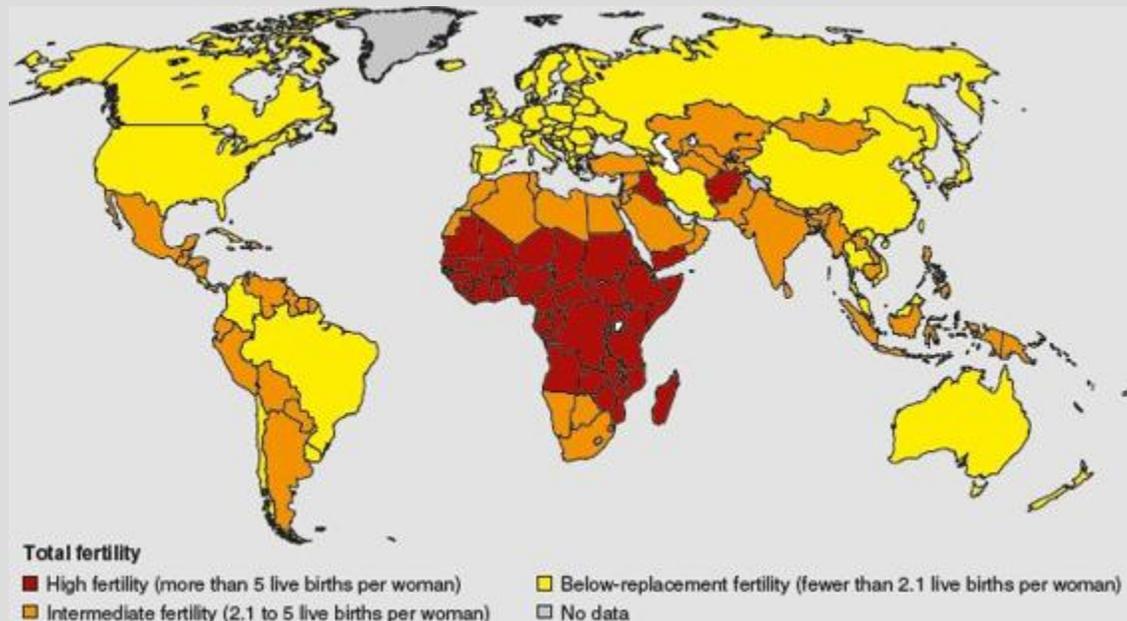

Total fertility
- ■ High fertility (more than 5 live births per woman)
- ■ Intermediate fertility (2.1 to 5 live births per woman)
- □ Below-replacement fertility (fewer than 2.1 live births per woman)
- □ No data

Figure 6.9 Total fertility 2010–15 (live births per woman)

Source: UN DESA (2017: 6).

Crude death rates (also called 'mortality rates') are calculated in a similar way to birth rates, but refer to the number of *deaths* per 1,000 of population per year. Again, there are major variations among countries, but death rates in many societies in the developing world are falling to levels comparable to those in developed nations. The death rate in the United Kingdom in 2002 was ten per 1,000, in India it was nine per 1,000, and in Ethiopia it was eighteen per 1,000. A few countries had much higher death rates. In Sierra Leone, for example, the death rate was thirty per 1,000. Like crude birth rates, crude death rates provide only a very general index of mortality (the number of deaths in a population). Specific death rates give more precise information. A particularly important specific death rate is the infant mortality rate: the number of babies per 1,000 births in any year who die before

reaching their first birthday. One of the key factors underlying the population explosion has been reductions in infant mortality rates.

Declining rates of infant mortality are the most important influence on increasing life expectancy – that is, the number of years the average person can expect to live. In 2007, life expectancy at birth for women born in the UK was 81.3 years, compared with 76.23 years for men (CIA 2007). This contrasts with forty-nine and forty-five years respectively at the turn of the twentieth century. This does not mean, however, that most people born in 1901 died when they were in their forties. When there is a high infant mortality rate, as there is in many developing nations, the average life expectancy – which is a statistical average – is brought down. Illness, nutrition and the influence of natural disasters are other factors that influence life expectancy.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Demography has traditionally been a quantitative subject, rooted in statistical analyses of large data sets. Refer back to some of the qualitative methods in chapter 2 and suggest what the adoption of these might add to our understanding of population dynamics.

In the developed countries, Malthusianism was seen as too pessimistic, since the population dynamic followed a quite different pattern from that which Malthus anticipated. Rates of population growth actually tailed off in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Indeed, in the 1930s there were major worries about population decline. The rapid global population growth of the later twentieth century made Malthus's views seem more palatable to some, though few would support them in the original version. Modern Malthusians see the population expansion in developing countries as outstripping the resources those countries can generate to feed their people, resulting in widespread undernourishment, poverty and conflict. Yet, as we have seen, progress is being made in many aspects of human development in even the

poorest countries, and global population stabilization in the not too distant future is now forecast.

The demographic transition

Demographers refer to long-run changes in the ratio of births to deaths in the developed countries since the nineteenth century as the demographic transition. This thesis was first outlined by Warren S. Thompson (1929), who described a three-stage process in which, as a society reaches an advanced level of economic development, one type of population stability will eventually be replaced by another. This thesis is discussed in 'Classic studies' 6.1.

[Classic studies 6.1](#) Demographic transition theory

The research problem

As societies industrialized from the mid-eighteenth century onwards, their populations increased rapidly. But a century or so later population growth had slowed, and in the twenty-first century many developed societies are barely replacing their populations. Why did this happen? Is there a pattern to this long-term transformation and, if so, is it likely to be repeated in the developing countries? How will it affect the size of the global human population in the future? Warren S. Thompson (1887–1973), an American demographer, was the first to identify a pattern to such developments, and his work was developed by later demographers who linked demographic trends to industrialization.

The Demographic Transition Model

Thompson recognized that, although changes to birth and death rates shape population growth and size, there are important *transitions* in such rates which have a profound impact on a country's population. Later demographers refined and developed his ideas into a model, usually referred to as the *Demographic Transition Model* (DTM), which identifies a series of stages as societies go through industrial development (refer to the model, illustrated in [figure 6.10](#), as you read the next section).

Stage 1 refers to the conditions characterizing most non-industrial societies, in which birth and death rates are high and the infant mortality rate is especially high. Population grows little, if at all, as the large number of births is more or less balanced by the number of deaths. This stage covers most of human history, as epidemics, disease and natural disasters kept human numbers down. In *Stage 2*, which began in most of Europe and the United States in the early part of the nineteenth century, the death rate fell but fertility remained high. The consequence was a phase of long-term population growth. European and North American colonial

expansion, with its exploitation of resources and indigenous populations, facilitated a more rapid economic development for the colonial powers. Alongside improvements in food quality, higher crop yields, safe water supplies, and more efficient sewerage and waste disposal systems, these developments led to a fall in death rates and a consequent rise in population. In *Stage 3* the birth rate also fell to a level such that the population gradually became fairly stable, though at a much higher absolute level than in Stage 1. Several possible reasons have been put forward for this change, including increasing literacy levels (particularly among women), leading to the challenging of traditional ideas on women solely as childbearers; compulsory education, which removed children from the workforce; and urbanization, which removed the need (in rural areas) for large families to work on the land.

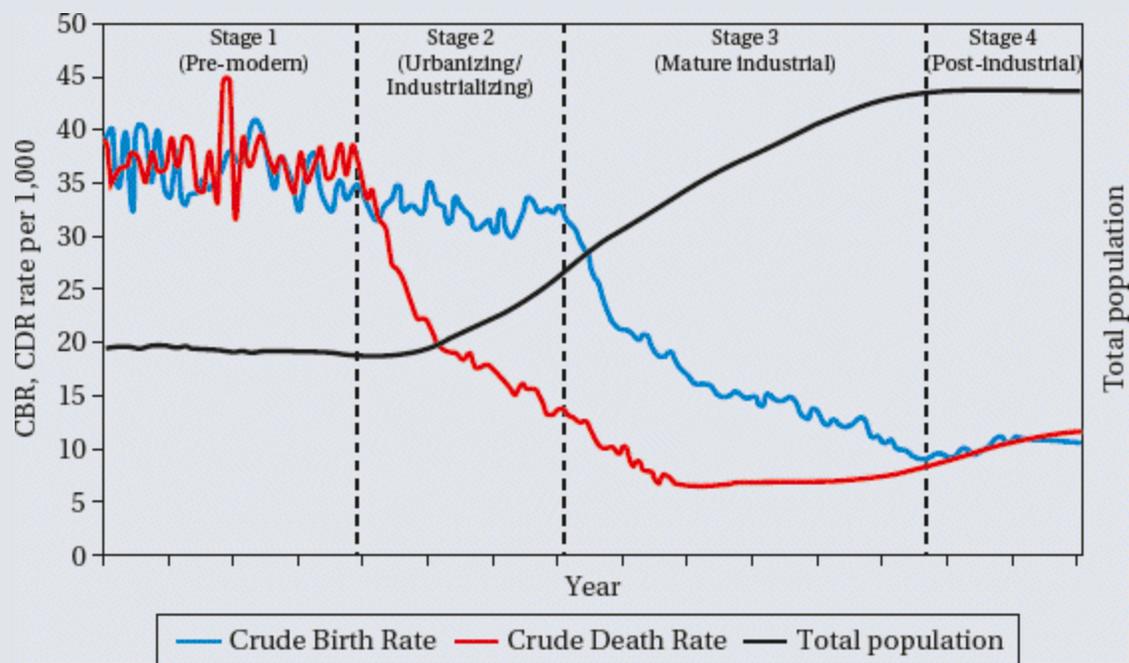**Figure 6.10** The Demographic Transition Model

Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Somewhat later, improved contraceptive technologies also played a major part in enabling people to control their fertility. Some demographers identify a *Stage 4*, in which populations stabilize, thus completing the demographic transition. However, some countries, among them Greece, Italy and Japan, have recently been

reproducing below replacement levels, and we might speculate about a stage in which population levels in advanced industrial societies decline. However, so far this stage remains a theoretical possibility rather than reality.

Critical points

Although it is generally accepted that the sequence accurately describes a major transformation in the demographic character of modern societies, there are considerable differences across the developed countries. When the model is applied to developing countries, critics point out that the emergence of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s has been a major factor, slowing or even halting some countries' progress, as death rates and infant mortality rates have risen rather than fallen. Sub-Saharan Africa has suffered most as a result of the spread of HIV/AIDS (see chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability').

The DTM has been widely seen as anti-Malthusian. It suggests that, rather than exponential growth leading to mass hunger and widespread famine, human populations are likely to settle into comfortable stability. One objection to this optimism is that the spread of Western-style consumerism to the global population would seriously threaten the planet's ecosystem, and on present population forecasts things can only get worse. Environmentalists argue we should not be so sanguine about high absolute human numbers but should be aiming for a managed *reduction* in the global population.

Contemporary significance

The DTM has been perhaps the most influential perspective on long-term population trends ever devised, and it continues to inform research in the field of demography. Demographers do not agree about how the sequence of change predicted by the model should be interpreted, though, or how long Stage 3 is likely to last. Nevertheless, the great virtue of the model is that it encourages us to take a long-term view of human development in a global perspective and provides a point from which to start doing so.

Demographic transition theory is based on the assumption – also held by Karl Marx – that industrial capitalism would spread across the world. As it does so, economies grow and intermingle, birth and death rates fall, and, after a period of rapid population growth, national populations stabilize and perhaps even fall. But what happens if economic development is uneven and some parts of the world just do not transition through the proposed stages? From what we know so far, there is little evidence of the world's societies becoming equally wealthy as global inequality persists. This much disputed issue is the subject of our next section.

Development theories and their critics

The older 'three worlds model' of the world lost ground partly because it failed to account for global integration and the movement of specific countries between the categories of the 'three worlds'. This became clearer by the mid-1970s, when a number of low-income countries in East Asia were undergoing a rapid process of industrialization (Amsden 1989; see chapter 4 for a discussion of this development). The process began with Japan in the 1950s but quickly spread to the newly industrializing countries (NICs) of the world, particularly in East Asia but also in Latin America. The East Asian NICs included Hong Kong in the 1960s and Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore in the 1970s and 1980s. Other Asian countries began to follow in the 1980s and the early 1990s, most notably China, but also Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

6.2 Raising the 'bottom billion' out of poverty

As we have seen, significant progress has been made in tackling disadvantage and poverty in many developing countries. Even so, that progress has been unevenly distributed across the developing world and some countries continue to struggle. Paul Collier's (2007) *The Bottom Billion* argues that the focus of development aid should now be on the poorest developing countries that have not made solid economic progress over recent decades. This would cover some sixty or so countries with a combined population of about 1 billion people. However, this view is not shared by all, and other research calls into question the conventional view that a majority of those people and families in absolute poverty live in the very poorest countries.

For example, a report for the Institute for Development Studies in the UK shows that 72 per cent of the 1.33 billion people living on less than US$1.25 a day are actually in middle-income countries (Sumner 2010). India and China still have very large numbers living in poverty (about 50 per cent of the global total), but, on account of rapid economic development over the last twenty years, both countries have been reclassified by the World Bank as 'middle-income countries' (Kanbur and Sumner 2011). Sumner notes that Indonesia, Pakistan and Nigeria have been similarly reclassified, but collectively they still account for most of the global poor whose home countries have moved into middle-income status.

This is an important interpretation of the data because it suggests that the conventional form of development assistance – aid targeting particular *countries* – may be becoming much less productive. Instead, assistance would be better aimed at *poor people*, regardless of the economic situation of the countries in which they live. If large numbers of citizens in middle-income countries still live in poverty, then tackling inequality within those

countries becomes a major issue, both for their governments and for foreign aid donors.

India is one of the fastest growing economies in the world, but poverty remains widespread in rural areas and urban slums.

Economists have tended to assume that the developing countries, collectively, would experience higher average rates of economic growth than the developed high-income ones as their development starts to catch up. However, until quite recently this was often not the case, and only a few developing countries managed to out-perform the average growth rates of the developed economies. This has changed since the

mid-1990s as the *average* growth rates of low- and middle-income countries have been higher than those in the developed world.

Using the fourfold World Bank country classification (see above), some countries have become richer, but others have also become poorer over time. Very recently, Argentina, Panama and Croatia have moved from the upper-middle-income into the high-income category. Conversely, the Syrian Arab Republic, Yemen and Tajikistan have all slipped into the low-income group from the lower-middle category. Armenia, Jordan and Guatemala are now ranked as upper-middle income, moving up from the lower-middle income group (World Bank 2018b).

Table 6.1 Cross-country, within-country and global inequalities

Source: Loungani (2003).

Concept of income inequality	Cross-country inequality	Within-country inequality	Global inequality
What it measures	Inequality of *average* income across countries	Differences between incomes of the rich and the poor within a country	Differences between incomes of the rich and the poor, ignoring the country to which they belong
What the evidence shows	Divergence	Increasing inequality in many countries (for example, Brazil, China, United States), but low and stable levels in many others (for example, Canada, France, Japan)	Convergence

Comparing countries on the basis of their average income level shows a wide divergence. Comparing the incomes of rich and poor people *within* a single country shows that, in the twenty-first century, some countries have experienced widening income inequality (the USA, the UK, Brazil), while others have remained fairly stable (France, Canada). If we measure global inequality since 1970 at the *individual* level, regardless of country of residence, the average 'global citizen' has become richer and the global income distribution has become more equal (Loungani 2003). This conclusion is heavily influenced by the rapid growth of a small number of large countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa (labelled BRICS countries) (Cousins et al. 2018). Economic growth rates remain very unevenly distributed.

The economic expansion in East Asia has not been without its costs. These have included the sometimes violent repression of labour and civil rights, terrible factory conditions, the exploitation of an increasingly female workforce, the exploitation of immigrant workers from impoverished neighbouring countries, and widespread environmental degradation. Nonetheless, thanks to the sacrifices of past generations of workers, large numbers of people in these countries are now prospering.

How have social scientists accounted for the rapid economic growth of the East Asian NICs? The answers may provide lessons for other countries hoping to emulate their success. Historically, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong and Singapore were once part of colonial regimes that, while imposing many hardships, paved the way for economic growth. Taiwan and Korea were tied to the Japanese Empire; Hong Kong and Singapore were former British colonies. Japan eliminated large landowners who opposed industrialization, and both Britain and Japan encouraged industrial development, constructed roads and transportation systems, and built relatively efficient governmental bureaucracies. Britain also actively developed both Hong Kong and Singapore as trading centres (Gold 1986; Cumings 1987). Elsewhere in the world – for example, in Latin America and Africa – countries that are poor today did not fare so well in their dealings with the richer, more powerful nations.

The East Asian region also benefited from a long period of world economic growth. Between the 1950s and the mid-1970s, the growing economies of Europe and the United States provided a substantial market for the clothing, footwear and electronics that were increasingly made in East Asia, creating a 'window of opportunity' for economic development. Periodic economic slowdowns in the United States and Europe forced businesses to cut their labour costs, and companies relocated their operations to the lower-wage East Asian countries (Henderson and Appelbaum 1992). One study by the World Bank (1995) found that, between 1970 and 1990, annual wage increases averaged 3 per cent in developing countries where economic growth was led by exports to wealthier countries, while wages failed to increase elsewhere in the developing world.

Economic growth in East Asia took off at the high point of the Cold War, when the United States and its allies provided generous economic and military aid as a barrier to communist expansion in the region. Direct aid and loans fuelled investment in new technologies such as transistors, semiconductors and other electronics, contributing to the development of local industries. Military assistance frequently favoured strong, often military governments that were willing to use repression to keep labour costs low (Mirza 1986; Cumings 1987, 2005; Castells 1992).

Some sociologists argue that the economic success of Japan and the East Asian NICs is in part the result of internal cultural traditions – in particular, their shared Confucian philosophy (Berger 1986). More than a century ago, Max Weber (1992 [1904–5]) contended that the Protestant belief in thrift, frugality and hard work helped to explain the rise of capitalism in Western Europe, and his argument has been applied to Asian economic history. Confucianism, it is asserted, inculcates respect for one's elders and superiors, education, hard work and proven accomplishments as the key to advancement, as well as a willingness to sacrifice today to earn a greater reward tomorrow. As a result of these values, this Weberian argument goes, Asian workers and managers are highly loyal to their companies, submissive to authority, hardworking and success-oriented. Workers and capitalists alike are said to be frugal and, instead of living lavishly, are likely to reinvest their wealth in further economic growth.

Weberians argue that the traditions of respect and submission to authority in Japanese culture partly explain the country's progressive economic development.

This explanation has merit, but it overlooks the fact that businesses are not always revered and respected in Asia. During the late 1950s, pitched battles occurred between workers and capitalists in Japan, as they did in South Korea in the late 1980s. Students and workers throughout the East Asian NICs have opposed business and governmental policies they saw as unfair, often at the risk of imprisonment and sometimes even their lives (Deyo 1989; Ho 1990). Confucian cultural values such as thrift have also declined in Japan and the NICs, as younger generations come to value conspicuous consumption over austerity and investment. A final factor in the rapid economic growth of the NICs is the intentional actions of the East Asian governments which adopted strong policies favouring economic growth. Government policy played an active role in keeping labour costs low, encouraging economic development through tax breaks and other economic policies, and offering free public education.

In 1997–8, a combination of poor investment decisions, corruption and world economic conditions brought the economic expansion of these countries to an abrupt halt. Their stock markets collapsed, currencies fell and the entire global economy was threatened. The experience of Hong Kong was typical: after thirtyseven years of continuous growth, the economy stalled and its stock market – the Hang Seng Index – lost more than half its value. By 2004, economists noted that Hong Kong's economy was again growing and the property market was rising.

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and economic recession that spread outwards from the USA to most of the developed countries, East Asian NICs have shown resilience. In spite of the inevitable impact of the crisis, higher oil prices from the Middle East, the South-East Asian economies of Singapore, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines had all returned to economic growth of between 5 and 7 per cent per year by 2015 (Fensom 2015). The slowdown in economic growth in China and India alongside China's housing bubble and growing debt burden – largely the result of local government spending on infrastructure projects – led to concerns of a new crash that could impact negatively on East Asia (Elliott 2013; Evans-Pritchard 2015). Nonetheless, we can conclude that the NICs were not just a 'flash in the pan' but have continued along their path of economic development. Despite some setbacks, this is probably the most solid evidence that some poor countries can not only become rich but, once established, are better able to hold onto their high-income status.

Theories of development

Outlining the extent and shape of global inequality provides us with a useful picture of the global situation. But explaining how this pattern came about and assessing how far it might change demands theories that link the evidence to types of society, international relations and socio-economic change. In this section, we look at different types of theory that have tried to explain economic development: market-oriented theories, dependency and world-systems theories, state-centred theories, and recent post-development critiques. Theories are necessary if we are to make sense of the huge amount of data collected from across the world's societies.

Market-oriented modernization theories

The most influential theories of global inequality advanced by British and American economists and sociologists forty years ago were market-oriented theories. These assume that the best possible economic consequences will result if individuals are free – uninhibited by any form of governmental constraint – to make their own economic decisions. Unrestricted capitalism, if it is allowed to develop fully, is said to be the avenue to economic growth. Government bureaucracy should not dictate which goods to produce, what prices to charge or how much workers should be paid. According to market-oriented theorists such as Walt Rostow (see 'Classic studies' 6.2), governmental direction of the economies of low-income countries results in blockages to economic development. In this view, local governments should get out of the way of development (Rostow 1961; Warren 1980; Ranis 1996).

[Classic studies 6.2](#) Walt Rostow and the stages of economic growth

The research problem

Why have some countries and regions experienced rapid economic development while others continue to struggle? Is the problem of underdevelopment essentially an internal one (rooted within particular countries), or is it the consequence of external forces? What can we learn about the process of development from the already developed societies? The answers given by Walt Rostow (1916–2003), an economic adviser to former US president John F. Kennedy who became an influential economic theorist, helped to shape US foreign policy towards Latin America during the 1960s.

Rostow's explanation

Rostow's explanation is a market-oriented approach, which came to be described as [modernization theory](#). Modernization theory says that low-income societies *can* develop economically, but only if they give up their traditional ways and adopt modern economic institutions, technologies and cultural values, which emphasize savings and productive investment. According to Rostow (1961), the traditional cultural values and social institutions of low-income countries impede their economic effectiveness. For example, he argued that many people in low-income countries lack a strong work ethic; they would rather consume today than invest for the future. Large families are also seen as partly responsible for 'economic backwardness', since a breadwinner with many mouths to feed can hardly be expected to save money for investment purposes.

But, for Rostow and other modernization theorists, the problems in low-income countries run much deeper. The *cultures* of such countries tend to support 'fatalism' – a value system that views hardship and suffering as an unavoidable part of normal life. Acceptance of one's lot thus discourages people from working hard and being thrifty in order to overcome their fate. On this view, then,

a country's economic underdevelopment is a result largely of the cultural failings of the people themselves. Such failings are reinforced by government policies that set wages and control prices, generally interfering in the operation of the economy. So how can low-income countries break out of their poverty? Rostow saw economic growth as moving through several stages, which he likened to the journey of an aeroplane (see [figure 6.11](#)):

1. *The traditional stage* is the stage just described, characterized by low rates of savings, the (supposed) lack of a strong work ethic and the 'fatalistic' value system. We could say that this aeroplane is stuck on the runway.

2. *Take-off to economic growth* The traditional stage *can* give way to a second one: economic take-off. This occurs when poor countries begin to jettison their traditional values and institutions and people start to save and invest money for the future. The role of wealthy countries is to facilitate and support this take-off. They can do this by financing birth control programmes or providing low-cost loans for electrification, road and airport construction, and starting new industries.

3. *Drive to technological maturity* According to Rostow, with the help of money and advice from high-income countries, the aeroplane of economic growth would taxi down the runway, pick up speed and become airborne. The country would then approach technological maturity. In the aeronautical metaphor, the plane would slowly climb to cruising altitude, improving its technology, reinvesting its recently acquired wealth in new industries, and adopting the institutions and values of the high-income countries.

4. *High mass consumption* Finally, the country would reach the phase of high mass consumption. Now people are able to enjoy the fruits of their labour by achieving a high standard of living. The aeroplane (country) cruises along on automatic pilot, having entered the ranks of the high-income countries.
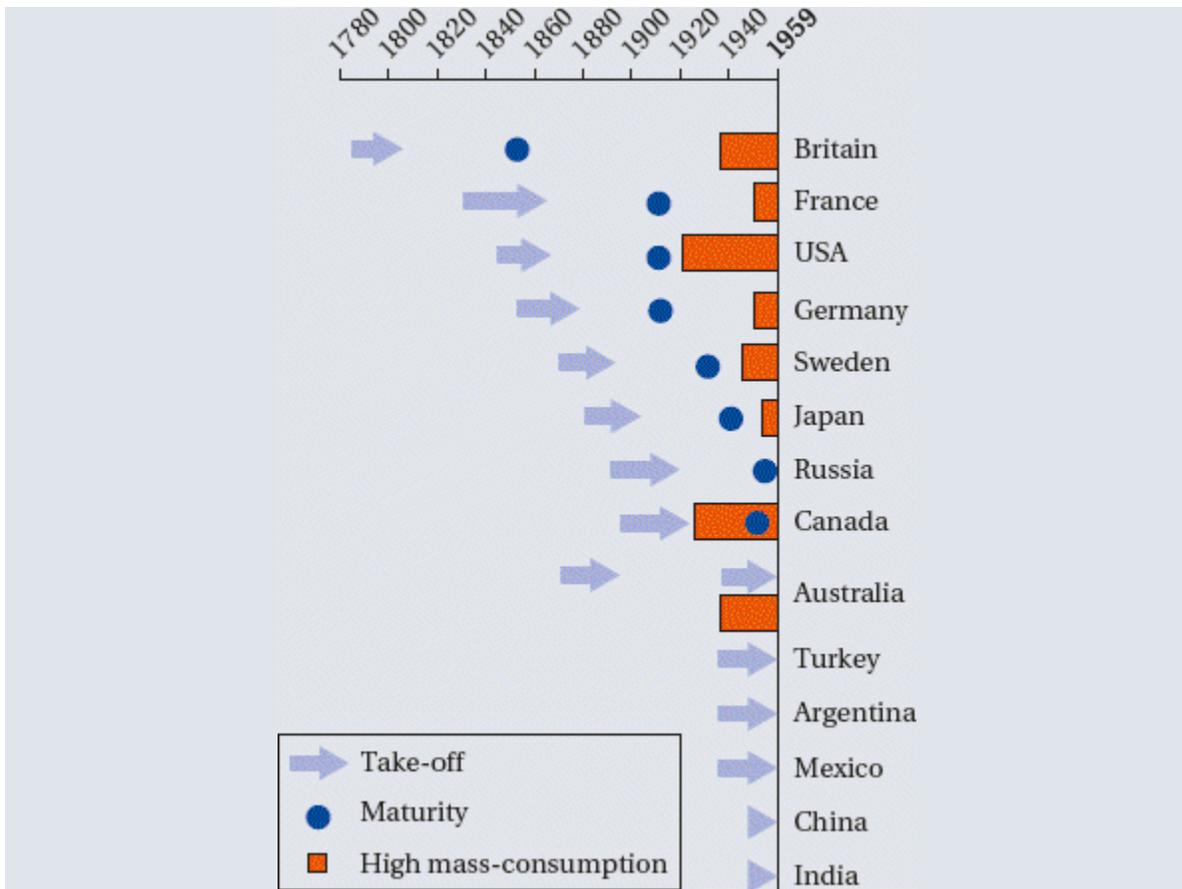
Figure 6.11 Rostow's stages of economic growth for selected countries, 1750–1959

Rostow's ideas remain influential. Indeed, neoliberalism, which is perhaps the prevailing view among economists today, can be seen as rooted in modernization theory. Neoliberals argue that free-market forces, achieved by minimizing governmental restrictions on business, provide the route to economic growth, holding that global free trade will enable all the countries of the world to prosper. Eliminating governmental regulation is seen as necessary for economic growth to occur. However, Rostow's model does allow for governmental action to promote development, something that free-market enthusiasts treat with suspicion.

Critical points

Supporters of modernization theory point to the success of the newly industrializing economies of East Asia as proof that development really is open to all. However, it can be objected (as we saw above) that the reasons for this success are partly accidental, involving Cold War political expediency and the historical legacy of colonialism. Such a conjunction of conditions is unlikely to apply to other low-income countries in the post-Cold War world. Indeed, even in the twenty-first century, many low-income countries, in spite of external assistance, have not passed through Rostow's stages and remain very far from becoming economically developed.

A further criticism is that Rostow saw high-income countries playing a key role in helping low-income ones to grow. But this fails to take proper account of the long-term consequences of colonialism, which benefited the militarily powerful European societies at the expense of those in Africa, Asia and Latin America, thus dealing the latter's economic development a devastating early blow. Finally, by pointing to 'fatalistic' cultural values as a causal factor in underdevelopment, Rostow can be seen as ethnocentric, holding up Western values, ideals and models of 'progress' as superior. As shown in chapter 5, 'The Environment', the Western pursuit of untrammelled economic growth has damaged the global natural environment, perhaps irrevocably, leading some to question whether this kind of 'progress' can be sustainable over the long term.

Contemporary significance

Rostow's theory of 'evolutionary' stages towards self-sustaining economic growth has suffered in the light of continued global poverty, hunger and underdevelopment, leading many to abandon it altogether. Certainly any notion of *inevitable* progress through the Rostovian stages finds little support today, and his 'non-communist manifesto' has attracted as much opposition and criticism as the original communist version of Marx and Engels (1848).

Yet, as we have already seen in this chapter, recent *global* indicators do present a more positive picture of an improving situation for many, though by no means all, populations in the low- and middle-

income countries of the world. This may show that economic development is not exclusive to the high-income societies and that, as Rostow argued, the process of modernization remains a possibility for all in an era of rapid globalization and the intensification of international trade.

> ## THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Karl Marx said that the industrialized countries presented to the less developed countries an image of their own future. What are the main differences between Marx's version of modernization theory and that of Walt Rostow? Which version, if any, is best supported by the historical evidence to date?

Dependency and world-systems theories

Market-oriented theories of global inequality, such as modernization theory, were sharply criticized in the 1960s. Many critics were sociologists and economists from the low-income countries of Latin America and Africa, who drew on Marxist ideas, rejecting the idea that their countries' economic underdevelopment was a result of their own cultural or institutional faults. Instead, they built on the theories of Marx, who argued that world capitalism would create a class of relatively powerless countries manipulated by more powerful countries, just as capitalists exploit workers. The dependency theorists argue that the poverty of low-income countries stems from their exploitation by wealthy countries and the multinational corporations that are based in wealthy countries (Peet and Hartwick 2015: ch. 5). In their view, global capitalism locked their countries into a downward spiral of exploitation and poverty.

Dependency theorists see the origins of this exploitation in colonialism, a political-economic system under which economically and militarily powerful countries established their rule over weaker countries. Powerful nations have colonized other countries usually to procure the raw materials needed for their factories and to control markets for the products manufactured in those factories. Under colonial rule, for

example, the petroleum, copper, iron and food products required by industrial economies are extracted from low-income countries by businesses based in high-income countries. Although colonialism typically involved European countries establishing colonies in North and South America, Africa and Asia, some Asian countries (such as Japan) had colonies as well.

Even though colonialism ended in most of the world after 1945, exploitation did not: transnational corporations continued to reap enormous profits from their branches in low-income countries. According to dependency theory, global companies, often with the support of powerful banks and governments in rich countries, established factories in poor countries, using cheap labour and raw materials to minimize production costs without governmental interference. In turn, the low prices set for labour and raw materials precluded poor countries from accumulating the profit necessary to industrialize, and local businesses were prevented from competing with Western companies. On this view, poor countries are forced to borrow and become indebted to the rich countries, thus increasing their economic dependency.

Low-income countries are thus seen as *misdeveloped* rather than underdeveloped (Frank 1966; Emmanuel 1972). Peasants are forced to choose between starvation and working at near-starvation wages on foreign-controlled plantations and in foreign-controlled mines and factories. Since dependency theorists argue that exploitation has prevented economic growth, they typically call for revolutionary changes that would push foreign corporations out of these countries altogether (Frank 1969).

While market-oriented theorists usually ignore political and military power, dependency theorists regard the exercise of power as central to enforcing unequal economic relationships. Whenever local leaders question such unequal arrangements, their voices are quickly suppressed by economic elites, who move to outlaw unionization; labour organizers are often jailed and sometimes killed. When people elect a government opposing these policies, that government is likely to be overthrown by the country's military, often backed by the armed forces of the industrialized countries. Dependency theorists point to

examples such as the role of the CIA in overthrowing the Marxist governments of Guatemala in 1954 and Chile in 1973 and in undermining support for the leftist government in Nicaragua in the 1980s. For dependency theorists, global economic inequality is backed up by military force. Economic elites in poor countries, backed by their counterparts in wealthy ones, use police and military power to keep the local population under control.

The Brazilian sociologist Fernando Henrique Cardoso, once a prominent dependency theorist, argued that some degree of 'dependent development' was nonetheless possible, though only in ways shaped by their reliance on the wealthier countries (Cardoso and Faletto 1979). In particular, the governments of these countries could play a key role in steering a course between dependency and development (Evans 1979). However, as president of Brazil from 1995 to 2003, Cardoso changed his thinking and called for greater integration of Brazil into the global economy.

During the last thirty years, sociologists have increasingly seen the world as a single – though often conflict-ridden – economic system. Although dependency theories hold that individual countries are economically tied to one another, world-systems theory argues that the capitalist economic system is not merely a collection of independent countries engaged in diplomatic and economic relations but must instead be understood as a single system. The world-systems approach is most closely identified with the work of Immanuel Wallerstein and his colleagues (Wallerstein 1974, 1980, 1989, and elsewhere).

See 'Classic studies' 4.1, in chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change', for a discussion of Wallerstein's pioneering role in world-systems theory.

Wallerstein argued that capitalism has long existed as a global economic system, beginning with the extension of markets and trade in

Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The world system is seen as comprising four overlapping elements (Chase-Dunn 1989):

- a world market for goods and labour

- the division of the population into different economic classes, particularly capitalists and workers

- an international system of formal and informal political relations among the most powerful countries, whose competition with one another helps shape the world economy

- the carving up of the world into three unequal economic zones, with the wealthier zones exploiting the poorer ones.

World-systems theorists term these three economic zones the 'core', the 'periphery' and the 'semi-periphery'. All countries in the capitalist world system fall into one of the three categories. Core countries are the most advanced industrial nations, taking the lion's share of profits from the world economy. These include Japan, the United States and Western Europe. Peripheral countries comprise most of the developing world, largely agricultural economies manipulated by the core countries for their own economic advantage. Peripheral countries are found throughout Africa and to a lesser extent in Latin America and Asia, where natural resources flow from periphery to core along with profits. The core, in turn, sells finished goods back to the periphery, also at a profit.

World-systems theorists argue that core countries have become wealthy through this unequal trade and, at the same time, limit the economic development of the periphery. Finally, the semi-peripheral countries occupy an intermediate position. These are semi-industrialized, middle-income countries that extract profits from peripheral countries and in turn yield profits to the core countries. Examples are Mexico, Brazil, Argentina and Chile and the newly industrializing economies of East Asia. The semi-periphery, though to some degree controlled by the core, is able to exploit the periphery, and its greater economic success holds out to the peripheral countries the promise of similar development.

Although the world system tends to change very slowly, once-powerful countries eventually lose their economic power and others can take their place. Some five centuries ago the Italian city-states of Venice and Genoa dominated the world capitalist economy. But they were superseded first by the Dutch, then the British and, currently, the United States. Today, in the view of some theorists, American dominance is giving way to a more 'multipolar' or 'multiplex' situation where the world order is shaped by several power centres, including the USA, Europe and Asia (Acharya 2018).

Global society 6.2 Big oil, Nigeria and the OPL 245 deal

Two of the world's largest oil companies, Dutch Royal Shell and the Italian firm ENI, are accused of entering into a deal with Nigerian government officials that would mean the people of Nigeria – a country with some of the highest levels of extreme poverty in the world – losing out on billions of dollars in oil revenues (Global Witness 2018). Since December 2018, a Milan court has been assessing charges of corruption against the two companies.

The scandal centres on a deal between Shell/Eni and Nigerian government ministers for a licence to develop a deepwater oilfield – OPL 245 – that is estimated to have 9 billion barrels of oil. The deal dates back to 2011, when Shell/Eni agreed to pay Nigeria US$1.3 billion for OPL 245. Rather than going to the Nigerian people, that payment actually went to a former Nigerian oil minister, Dan Etete, who effectively handed himself the oilfield in 1998 though his own company, Malabu Oil and Gas. The campaigning organization Global Witness has sought to show that Shell/Eni knew that their payment would go into private hands and to pay bribes, including to the then Nigerian president, Jonathan Goodluck, but continued to pursue it. Global Witness believes that the deal should be cancelled (Padmore 2018).

The OPL 245 deal was presented by Shell/Eni as a standard 'production sharing contract', in which a share of the profits from developing the field would go to the Nigerian government. Yet the agreement actually removed the state's profit share altogether, thereby potentially costing the country almost US$5 billion in profits that could have been used for public services and infrastructure projects. Global Witness (2018) argues that this amount 'is equivalent to twice the country's annual health and education budget, or enough to train six million teachers.' For their part, the companies maintain that this was simply a legitimate business deal.

Dependency theory holds that Western transnational corporations moving into Africa and elsewhere in search of expanding profits are part of the active process of underdevelopment, which prevents developing countries competing on equal terms.

In 2019, Nigerian President Buhari was seeking damages of at least US$1 billion from Shell, Eni and Malabu Oil and Gas and looking to a commercial court in London to declare the deal invalid due to corruption. Nigeria is also suing the investment bank JP Morgan for financial negligence in mishandling state funds (Turner 2019). In March 2019, the Dutch Public Prosecutor's Office told Shell that it was preparing to prosecute the company on criminal charges that were either directly or indirectly linked to the OPL 245 deal (Holmes 2019). In 2020, prosecution lawyers sought a jail term of eight years for Eni's chief executive, Claudio Descalzi, the same for the former CEO, Paulo Scaroni, just over seven years for Shell's head of exploration and production, Malcolm Brinded, and ten years for Dan Etete (Munshi and Raval 2020).

Global Witness notes that the OECD has described the extractives industry as 'the most corrupt on the planet' on account of the secretive way that deals are done between companies and states.

They suggest that, depending on the outcome, the Milan trial could lead to major changes in the oil and gas sector.

State-centred theories

Some of the more recent explanations of successful economic development emphasize the role of state policy in promoting economic growth. Differing sharply from market-oriented theories, state-centred theories argue that appropriate government policies do not interfere negatively with economic development but, rather, can play a key role in bringing it about. A large body of research now suggests that, in some regions of the world, such as East Asia, successful economic development has been state-led. Even the World Bank, long a strong proponent of free-market theories of development, has changed its thinking about the role of the state. In its 1997 report *The State in a Changing World*, the World Bank concluded that, without an effective state, 'sustainable development, both economic and social, is impossible.'

Strong governments contributed in various ways to economic growth in the East Asian NICs during the 1980s and 1990s (Appelbaum and Henderson 1992; Amsden et al. 1994; World Bank 1997). For example, some East Asian governments acted aggressively to ensure political stability while keeping their labour costs low. This was achieved by acts of repression, such as outlawing trade unions, banning strikes, jailing labour leaders and, in general, silencing the voices of workers. The governments of Taiwan, South Korea and Singapore in particular have engaged in such practices as a way of encouraging inward investment.

Similarly, East Asian governments have frequently sought to steer economic development in their desired directions. State agencies provided cheap loans and tax breaks to businesses that invested in favoured industries. Sometimes this strategy backfired, resulting in bad loans held by the government – one cause of the region's economic problems in the late 1990s. Some governments prevented businesses from investing their profits in other countries, forcing them to invest in economic growth at home. In some cases, governments have owned and controlled key industries. The Japanese government has owned railways, the steel industry and banks, South Korea has owned banks, and the government of Singapore has owned airlines and the armaments and shiprepair industries.

Governments in East Asia have also created social programmes such as low-cost housing and universal education. The world's largest public housing systems outside former communist countries have been in Hong Kong and Singapore, where government subsidies keep rents extremely low. As a result, workers do not require high wages to pay for their housing, which means that they can compete with American and European workers in the emerging global labour market. The Singaporean government also requires businesses and individual citizens alike to save a large percentage of their income for investment in future growth.

Post-development critiques

In the early 1990s, the dominant concept of 'development' came under severe criticism from scholars and activists, many of them working in developing countries. Drawing on Foucault's ideas on how powerful discourses in society limit and shape knowledge on crime, mental health and sexuality, the 'development discourse' which was established after 1945 was seen as limiting how global poverty and inequality are understood. Sachs (1992: 1) argued that 'The last forty years can be called the age of development. This epoch is coming to an end. The time is ripe to write its obituary.' For some, this statement marked the start of a new era of post-development which bears some similarity to ideas of post-industrialism and postmodernism.

The categorizing by US president Harry S. Truman in 1949 of Africa, Asia and Latin America as 'underdeveloped' effectively belittled the diverse countries of these regions, marking them out as inferior to the industrialized societies (Esteva 1992). In doing so, the ensuing development discourse is seen by post-development theorists as a central element in maintaining the power of the minority world over the global majority (Escobar 1995). In the post-1945 period, when colonial regimes were giving way to the demands for national independence and autonomy in the so-called Third World, development discourse, policy and institutions 'helped a dying and obsolete colonialism to transform itself into an aggressive – even sometimes an attractive – instrument able to recapture new ground' (Rahnema 1997: 384).

Post-development theory has gained ground for several reasons. First, the ending of the Cold War after 1989 changed the relationship between developing countries and the two competing superpowers of the USA and the USSR, both of which had offered 'development' in order to expand their geopolitical influence. The apparent superiority of industrial civilization was also undermined by a growing environmentalist critique, which called into question why this model, which has been so ecologically destructive, should be imported into the developing world. Finally, many argued that the evidence from forty years of development was that the global inequality gap had actually widened, and in this sense the development project had clearly failed its recipients (Ziai 2007: 4). But if the industrial model of modernization has run into the sand, what alternative model should be pursued?

Some suggest this is simply the wrong question. Escobar (1995) argues that post-development is not about finding 'development alternatives' but, rather, concerns alternatives *to* development, as conventionally defined. And it is more likely that these alternatives will be found in indigenous local cultures, grassroots movements and community initiatives. Instead of becoming another overarching discourse, post-development theory is closer to a motivating ideology which legitimizes the practical solutions of local people, who are closer to the social and economic problems of their own countries. This approach is seen as

preferable to relying on development 'experts' with little understanding of local knowledge and traditions.

Critics assert that post-development theory, like postmodernism, is much better at criticism than practical, constructive suggestions for change. The risk of their stringent, generalized critique of modern, scientific development perspectives is that the latter's genuinely progressive aspects will also be rejected. Kiely (1999: 47) argues that rejecting development initiatives on the basis of their origin rather than their effectiveness in tackling serious problems, such as high infant mortality rates, 'expresses the view, not of the consistent multiculturalist, but of the patronising tourist.' Others suggest that post-development theory fails to see that an outright rejection of modernity could allow patriarchal local elites and anti-democratic fundamentalists the space to become politically powerful (Nanda 2004).

However, although the post-development critique has not yet displaced existing development perspectives, it has been successful in forcing all those working in development and development studies to be more reflexive in both their analyses and their practices.

Evaluating theories of development

Development theories of various theoretical stripes have their particular strengths and weaknesses, but, taken together, we gain a better grasp of the causes and potential solutions to reducing global inequality. Market-oriented theories recommend the adoption of modern capitalist institutions to promote economic development, as the East Asia NICs have done successfully. They also argue that countries can develop economically only if they open their borders to trade. But market-oriented theories fail to take account of the various economic ties between poorer countries and wealthier ones – ties that can impede or enhance economic development. They tend to blame low-income countries for their poverty rather than looking to the influence of outside factors, such as the business operations of more powerful nations. Market-oriented theories also ignore the ways government can work with the private sector to generate economic

development, and they do not explain why some countries take off economically while others cannot.

Dependency theories address some of the issues that market-oriented theories neglect, such as considering how wealthy countries have developed by exploiting poorer ones economically. Yet dependency theories are unable adequately to explain the successes of low-income countries such as Brazil and Argentina or the rapidly expanding economies of East Asia. In fact, some countries that were once in the low-income category have risen economically even *with* the presence of Western multinational corporations. Former colonies such as Hong Kong and Singapore, previously dependent on the UK, are also major economic success stories. World-systems theory sought to overcome these shortcomings by analysing the world economy as a whole, exploring the complex global web of political and economic relationships that influence development and inequality.

State-centred theories focus on the governmental role in fostering economic growth and thereby offer a useful alternative to both the prevailing market-oriented theories, with their emphasis on the state as a hindrance, and dependency theories, which view states as allies of global business elites. When combined with the other theories – particularly world-systems theory – state-centred theories can help to explain many of the changes transforming the world economy.

The post-development critique is a significant reminder that the very concept of 'development' is a contested one which runs the risk of privileging the experience of the relatively rich countries, leading to an exclusive focus on crude economic measures. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen argues that, as well as understanding global inequality, theories of development have to recognize that 'development' is ultimately a matter of human freedom. If so, then individual agency must be at the centre of the process.

In particular, Sen (2001: 36) holds that the expansion of freedom is both the 'primary end' and the 'principal means' of development. Pursuing development means attempting to remove 'unfreedoms' (such as tyranny, famine or poverty) which prevent individuals from being able to make real choices and to 'do things one has reason to value'

(ibid.: 18). More freedom also means that people are able to help themselves and therefore to have more influence on society's development.

Moving towards a focus on 'development as freedom' does not mean ignoring the very real obstacles to greater global equality, nor does it mean ignoring mainstream issues of comparative GNI per capita or other economic criteria. Concentrating on the expansion of individual freedoms does require states and multilateral organizations – such as the IMF, World Bank and United Nations – to review their public policies *from the perspective* of freedom. In short, Sen's argument suggests that individual freedom needs to become a social commitment in order to bridge the divide between structure and agency and give a new direction to the process of 'development'.

Development amid inequality

Today the social and economic forces leading to a global capitalist economy appear irresistible. The main challenge to this outcome – socialism/communism – effectively ended with the collapse of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence of Russia, which abandoned communism and moved rapidly towards a capitalist economic model. Today the largest remaining communist country, the People's Republic of China, also exhibits many principles of the market economy, which have enabled very rapid economic growth since 1978.

Debate and discussion continue on how best to characterize the Chinese economic system. For some scholars, China has a form of state capitalism, in which the market economy is both promoted and governed by a powerful state apparatus. This means that some conventional aspects of Western capitalism, such as private ownership, financial liberalization and secure property rights, are not core elements of 'Chinese capitalism' (Huang 2008; Hung and Chen 2018). For others, capitalism in China has arisen not directly from a shift in state policy but from the activities of private businesses, which quickly became the main driver of job creation and economic growth. As a result, state policy shifted to bring private enterprises onto an equal footing with state-run firms, allowing them to expand more quickly

than previously. On this view, China's rapid economic development cannot be characterized as 'state capitalism'. Rather, it is a result of the increasing role that market forces play within the Chinese economy (Lardy 2014).

The fast-growing Chinese economy has seen a widening internal gap between rich and poor. Does Piketty's analysis at the start of this chapter anticipate such an outcome?

Nonetheless, most experts agree that, as China continues to engage with the global capitalist system, the country's impact will increasingly be felt around the world. With an enormous workforce, mostly well trained and educated, who receive extremely low wages compared with workers in similar jobs in the developed world, China is extremely competitive, potentially forcing down wages in the wealthy countries.

What does rapid globalization mean for global inequality? Two contrasting scenarios exist. In one, the global economy might be dominated by large, global corporations, with workers competing against one another for a living wage. On this scenario we could forecast falling wages and more insecure, casual work for large numbers of people in the high-income countries and rising wages in the low-income countries. There would be a general levelling out of average income around the world, but at a lower level than that currently enjoyed in the developed countries. Polarization between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots' within countries would grow, and the world would be increasingly divided into those who benefit from the global economy and those who do not. This may fuel conflict between ethnic groups and even nations, as those suffering from economic globalization would blame others for their plight (Hirst and Thompson 1992; Wagar 1992).

A second scenario would see greater opportunities for everyone as the benefits of modern technology stimulate worldwide economic growth. The more successful East Asian NICs may be a sign of things to come. Others such as Malaysia and Thailand will follow, along with China, Indonesia, Vietnam and more. India, the world's second most populous country, already boasts a middle class of some 200 million people, about a quarter of its total population, showing that positive development is already being generated for some countries (Kulkarni 1993).

However, one crucial factor that may make the second scenario less likely is the widening technology gap between rich and poor countries, which makes it difficult for poorer countries to catch up. Poorer countries cannot easily afford modern technology – yet, in the absence of it, they face major barriers in overcoming poverty and are caught in a vicious downward spiral. Jeffrey Sachs (2000), then the director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University in New York, claims that the

world is becoming divided into three classes: technology innovators, technology adopters and the technologically disconnected. Technology innovators are those regions that provide nearly all of the world's technological inventions, accounting for less than 15 per cent of the world's population. Technology adopters are those regions that are able to adopt the technologies invented elsewhere, applying them to production and consumption; they account for 50 per cent of the world's population. Finally, the technologically disconnected are those regions that neither innovate nor adopt technologies and account for 35 per cent of the world's population. Sachs uses regions for comparison rather than countries because technologies do not always respect national frontiers.

Sachs says that technologically disconnected regions include southern Mexico, parts of Central America, the Andean countries, tropical Brazil, sub-Saharan Africa, most of the former Soviet Union, landlocked parts of Asia, landlocked Laos and Cambodia, and the deep-inte-rior states of China. These impoverished regions lack access to markets or major ocean trading routes and have become caught in what Sachs terms a 'poverty trap', plagued by diseases, low agricultural productivity and environmental degradation. Ironically, these problems demand technological solutions.

Innovation requires a critical mass of ideas and technology to become self-sustaining. 'Silicon Valley', near San Francisco in the United States, provides an example of how technological innovation tends to be concentrated in regions rich in universities and high-tech firms. Silicon Valley grew up around Stanford University and other educational and research institutions located south of San Francisco. Developing countries are ill-equipped to establish such regions; they are too poor to import computers, mobile phones, computerized factory machinery and other kinds of high technology. Nor can they afford to license technology from foreign companies that hold the patents. Sachs urges governments of wealthy countries, along with international lending institutions, to provide loans and grants for scientific and technological development to help bridge the technology divide.

Prospects for the twenty-first century

Predicting future trends – often called futurology – does not have a good track record. As we have seen, catastrophist demographers have been predicting that the world's oil resources would run out 'in the next decade' for more than forty years. Similar forecasts of the mass starvation of hundreds of millions of people by the 1970s as a result of population growth did not materialize either, despite continuing undernourishment in some regions. Part of the reason for the failures of futurology is that forecasts are based on trends that are active in the present, and these are amenable to both intentional and unintentional change. However, we can at least summarize something of what we have learned from this chapter.

In the twenty-first century the human world remains grossly unequal, where place of birth is perhaps the largest influence on an individual's life chances. If you happen to be born in a relatively wealthy developed country, chances are you will not be at risk of starvation, will be housed in some degree of comfort and will have many opportunities for work and career. You also have a decent prospect of becoming part of the wealthiest 1 per cent of people on the planet. If you are born into a poorer country, especially outside the middle classes, gaining an education may well be a struggle, work opportunities will be limited and life expectancy will be lower. This is exactly what global inequality means – radically different life chances rooted in the simple fact of being born. This knowledge is also what motivates some people to try to understand better how global inequality is (re)produced and others to try and eliminate it.

But the chapter also provides some highly positive examples of development in some of the poorest countries and regions of the world. As Peet and Hartwick (2015) point out, the concept of 'development' has been part of modernity since the Enlightenment period. This version of development is not just about the production of economic growth but means cultural, social and ethical progress too – development as the movement towards a better life for everyone. This meaning continues today but with an acknowledgement that a solid

economic foundation is required to support the real and significant global progress that has been made in health, education and life expectancy over just the last half century. As the UNDP argues, the evidence is that 'development works'. Critics might agree but would also note that it is not happening quickly enough.

China, India, Brazil, Russia and Vietnam have made enormous economic progress, and a raft of other countries, including Ethiopia, Panama, Gambia, Nepal and Indonesia, have made positive improvements according to the UNDP's broader HDI. Of course development on the HDI measure, very welcome though it is, may do little to bridge the economic equality gap if the developed countries continue to reap proportionately more rewards from the world economy. But perhaps this illustrates something of the point that post-development theorists seek to make – namely, that what constitutes 'development' or 'progress' cannot simply be lifted out of the context of the developed countries and used as a universal measure.

Indeed, concerns with work–life balance, downsizing, living simpler lifestyles and 'treading softly on the Earth', which have surfaced in the developed societies, indicate a growing dissatisfaction with purely economic criteria of well-being. If so, then there may be early signs of a theoretical convergence towards something closer to the UN Human Development Index with its multiple indicators of 'development'. From the evidence in the chapter, any movement towards genuine convergence cannot proceed without a corresponding reduction in the extreme global inequality we see today.

？ <u>Chapter review</u>

1. Provide some examples of global inequality. What is meant by 'extreme inequality'?

2. Explain the differences between a) the three worlds model; b) the contrast between developed/developing countries; and c) the idea of majority/minority worlds. How have these designations changed over time?

3. In what ways is the World Bank classification of high-, lower-middle, upper-middle and low-income countries an improvement on previous classification schemes?

4. What is the Human Development Index? Outline the factors that make up the UNDP concept of 'human development'. Can human development be achieved in low-income countries with current levels of global *economic* inequality?

5. List some of the main improvements that have been made in education, health, access to food, water and sanitation, and the overall economic conditions in developing countries.

6. What can we learn about 'development' from the movement of some low-income countries into the high-income category? Could all of the world's countries become high-income countries? What would prevent this?

7. How do *market-oriented theories* of global inequality – such as modernization theory – explain persistent poverty in the developing countries?

8. Provide some examples of *dependency theories*. How does Wallerstein's *world-systems theory* differ from the assumptions of the dependency perspective?

9. *State-centred theories* emphasize the role of government in generating economic development. Using specific examples, how have governments actually promoted economic growth and development?

10. Why is demography relevant in the study of global economic inequality? In what form are Malthusian ideas on population crises still alive today?

11. Does the Demographic Transition Model adequately account for the current and future population dynamic in developing countries?

🔍 **Research in practice**

The production and equitable distribution of food is one of the most significant issues for global development. As we have seen, the number of undernourished people around the world remains quite stable, at around 800 million. One hope is that new food technologies, such as genetically modified organisms (GMOs), may make a significant contribution towards solving this longstanding problem. Is this likely, or will developing countries become ever more dependent on Western transnational corporations for their food security? The paper below explores the issues raised in a recent international tribunal case.

Busscher, N., Colombo, E. L., van der Ploeg, L., Gabella, J. I., and Leguizamón, A. (2019) 'Civil Society Challenges the Global Food System: The International Monsanto Tribunal', *Globalizations*, 17(1): 16–30.

1. What is the subject of this article? Is it guided by a key research question(s) or does it have an alternative focus?

2. According to the authors, what is currently wrong with 'the global food system' and why does it produce negative outcomes for many developing countries?

3. What specific allegations were there against Monsanto at the tribunal? Who made the allegations?

4. What is the legal status of such tribunals and what were the panel's conclusions?

5. If Monsanto did not attend the tribunal and the panel's conclusions carry no legal weight, what, according to the authors, were the positive outcomes for those who brought the case?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Multi-billionaires have had a bad press. As the absolute extremes of global inequality grow ever wider, defending the fabulous wealth held by the super-rich has become much more difficult. Indeed, a growing awareness of global inequality has called into question the operation of contemporary capitalism as an open, entrepreneurial economic system. One way to combat such criticism is for billionaires to give back some of their wealth for the general social good. One well-publicized effort was led by Warren Buffett and Bill and Melinda Gates, who created The Giving Pledge in 2010. This is described as 'an effort to help address society's most pressing problems by inviting the world's wealthiest individuals and families to commit more than half of their wealth to philanthropy or charitable causes either in their lifetime or in their will' (see https://givingpledge.org). Given the potentially large sums this initiative could generate, the potential exists to tackle some of the most serious problems of global inequality.

Start by visiting The Giving Pledge website. Looking at the favoured charities and causes identified by the signatories, is the Pledge likely to make a significant impact on global inequality? Nine years after its founding, try to find out how much money has been given away so far by the more than 200 signatories. If billionaires are prepared to give away, collectively, perhaps US$500 to 600 billion, why do governments shy away from introducing higher rates of taxation for the super-rich? Provide some social-psychological reasons why billionaires will sign up to a voluntary scheme such as the Pledge, but would not support mandatory higher taxes.

⭐ Society in the arts

The work of the Australian visual artist Aaron Moore has a central theme of global inequality. For instance, in December 2012, his performance *One Thing You Lack* (a biblical phrase) saw him sell all of his possessions, from clothing to books and a motorbike, to raise funds for people in poverty. Moore's *Don't Deny Us Development* (2015) was a multi-channel video work showing many different voices of Australians alongside Zambian farmers, played out on an installation of recycled television sets. Explore Moore's related work on his website.

It is not surprising that issues of poverty, undernourishment and development should be themes in the work of artists, film-makers and novelists. In this particular case, what were the stated aims of the artist for this body of work? As sociologists, what can we learn from these works that we have not already learned from the statistical analysis of international organizations such as the UN, World Bank and other sociological research projects? Construct an argument in favour of the proposition that, despite the serious problems associated with global inequality and development, the latter do provide legitimate subject matter for artists.

Further reading

A good place to start is with Danny Dorling's (2015) *Inequality and the 1%* (London: Verso), a lively discussion on the consequences for the world of extreme wealth in the hands of a tiny minority. David Held and Ayse Kaya's edited collection (2007) *Global Inequality* (Cambridge: Polity) helpfully covers a broad range of topics. The measurement of inequality is well handled in Branko Milanović's (2007) *Worlds Apart: Measuring International and Global Inequality* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), which is a stimulating read.

A good account of the history of the concept of development is Gilbert Rist's (2014) *The History of Development: From Western Origins to Global Faith* (4th edn, London: Zed Books). Katie Willis's (2011) *Theories and Practices of Development* (2nd edn, Abingdon: Routledge) looks at attempts to put theory into practice. Richard Peet and Elaine Hartwick's (2015) *Theories of Development: Contentions, Arguments, Alternatives* (3rd edn, London: Guilford Press) covers many theories, including recent poststructuralist, feminist and critical modernist ideas.

Finally, a good reader is Vandana Desai and Robert B. Potter's edited collection (2014) *The Companion to Development Studies* (3rd edn, Abingdon: Routledge).

@ **Internet links**

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Inequality.org – based at the Institute for Policy Studies, Washington, DC. The site tracks inequality news and is full of useful resources:
http://inequality.org/global-inequality/

Forbes **magazine – everything you always wanted to know about the super-rich, including who they are and how much they own (a lot):**
www.forbes.com/billionaires/

The International Monetary Fund – the official IMF site:
www.imf.org/

The World Bank – search the site for the latest *World Development Report***:**
www.worldbank.org/

Global Call to Action against Poverty – a global coalition of groups campaigning on issues of poverty and inequality:
https://gcap.global/

United Nations Development Programme – lots of information on inequality, home to the HDI reports and the Sustainable Development Goals:
www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals.html

CHAPTER 7

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

CONTENTS

In recent years the humble public toilet has become one of numerous sites of contestation between trans-rights campaigners and some radical feminists. Should all public spaces and facilities become gender-neutral?

It is a sociological truism that social change is a continuous process with no endpoint. Nowhere is this more visible than in the diversification of sexual and gender identities. A few examples will help to set the scene for our discussion in this chapter.

In September 2019, pop singer Sam Smith told Instagram followers: 'After a lifetime of being at war with my gender I've decided to embrace myself for who I am, inside and out.' Smith came out as non-binary – that is, neither exclusively male nor exclusively female, neither masculine nor feminine – and asked fans to use the pronouns 'they' and 'them' rather than 'he' or 'him'. They said male and female identification did not accurately capture their feeling or sense of self, as 'I flow somewhere in between' (BBC News 2019a). Smith's sense of gender fluidity illustrates one aspect of the major, ongoing shift in gender identity in many societies today.

In August 2014, at the age of sixty-one, the boxing promoter and self-styled 'man's man' Frank Maloney announced that he was transitioning to become a woman. The reassignment process was not easy, involving

extensive surgery and medical treatments as Frank became Kellie. After transitioning, Kellie explained why she underwent this process:

> behind the public face another person had always lurked: Kellie, the woman I always wanted to be. In fact, it wasn't just a case of her being the woman I always wanted to be, it was more a case of Kellie being the real me. The truth was I had always been a woman trapped inside the body of a man, but in order to protect and hide that truth I had lived a lie all my life. (Maloney 2015: 12–13)

Maloney's solution to gender dysphoria – a term used by some to describe the disjunction between her self-identity as a woman and her male, physical body – was to become a trans woman – someone who was assigned as male at birth but whose self-identity is female. Other high-profile celebrities have helped in bringing transgender issues to public attention. The Olympic Games decathlon gold medallist Bruce Jenner transitioned to become Caitlyn Jenner; the transgender actor Laverne Cox starred in the successful Netflix series *Orange is the New Black*; while Andreja Pejić was the first transgender model to be profiled in the fashion magazine *Vogue*.

The term transgender (or trans) covers a variety and increasing number of people today who experience 'gender variance', including those whose gender identity and/or performance of gender diverges from that assigned at birth or is expected according to dominant social norms of femininity and masculinity. Cisgender (or cis) is a term used to describe people whose assigned gender at birth does coincide with their self-identity and gender performance.

In the UK, the number of referrals to gender identity centres have been rising rapidly since 2010. The Gender Identity Research and Education Society (GIRES) reported that numbers were growing by about 15 per cent per year (Day 2015). One NHS health trust reported that 678 individuals under the age of eighteen were referred to them in 2014–15, but by 2018–19 this had increased to 2,590, an average rise of around 40 per cent per annum. A majority, around three-quarters, of under-eighteen referrals were for people assigned female at birth. The total number of UK referrals (adults and under-eighteens) also rose, from 3,300 in 2014–15 to 8,074 in 2018–19 (Marsh 2019). Given the

rapidly rising numbers of people seeking their help, it is not surprising that gender identity services suffer from an acute lack of capacity. Such basic statistics are one sign of increasing gender fluidity. They also show that, as more people experience gender dysphoria, there will be significant challenges for every social institution, from health services to education systems and schools, workplaces and public spaces.

Questions of gender and sexuality are now well established in sociology. What, if any, is the relationship between biology and gender identity? How is sexuality connected to human biology and self-identity? What do we mean by 'male' and 'female', 'men' and 'women'? Some fundamental aspects of our personal identities may not be as fixed or secure as many previously thought. Instead, gender and sexual identities are fluid, shifting and unstable, and this chapter attempts to show how sociological research and theorizing in this area has developed. We should note that the study of gender and sexuality is a complex, developing field replete with major disagreements, both theoretical and political, and the main locus of sociological research remains the industrialized countries.

Many of the themes in this chapter overlap with questions raised in chapter 15, 'Families and Intimate Relationships', as sex, gender and sexuality are closely linked to love, intimacy and personal relationships. In this chapter we begin by looking at what we mean by sex, gender and sexuality, examining theories of gender and sexual identity. The thoroughgoing social constructionism of sociological approaches today is contrasted with commonly held biological ideas. We move on to discuss feminist theories and perspectives, consecutive 'waves' of feminist activism, and the theory of a gender order that structures gender relations. This is followed by the development of LGBTQ+ civil rights, including the recent heated debate between transgender and feminist activists, before the chapter ends with a discussion of sex trafficking and the diversity of sex work today.

Gender, sex and sexuality

Since the development of feminist theories and ideas in the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, sociology has operated with a basic contrast between sex and gender. Sex can mean sexual activity, as in to 'have sex' with someone, but it can also refer to physical characteristics, such as the female uterus and male/female genitalia, that distinguish the 'female sex' from the 'male sex'. Gender, by contrast, concerns social, cultural and psychological differences between men and women that are shaped within the social process and involve relations of power. Gender is linked to socially constructed norms of masculinity and femininity and is not a direct product of biology. As we have seen, some people feel they have been born into the 'wrong' physical body and may seek to 'put things right' by transforming it.

In many countries, but especially in the industrialized world, important aspects of people's sexual lives have also changed in fundamental ways since the 1960s. The previously dominant view that sexuality was intimately tied to biological reproduction is undermined by the recognition that, in practice, there is no necessary link between sexuality and reproduction. Gender and sexuality are dimensions of life for individuals to explore and shape, and the widespread assumption of heteronormativity – that heterosexuality is 'normal' and 'right', while other sexualities are 'deviant' – has given way to a broader acceptance of difference and diverse sexualities. Yet many discussions of gender differences and sexuality do still suggest that there are basic or natural differences between men and women. Is it metaphorically true that 'men are from Mars and women are from Venus' (Gray 1993)?

The hypothesis that biological factors determine behavioural patterns continues to surface from time to time in some natural science studies. For example, as brain-imaging technology has advanced and scientists have gained a better idea of brain connectivity and activity, some studies claim to have identified differences in female and male brains that lead to forms of gendered behaviour rooted in biology. Yet, as Connell (1987) argued, there is still no evidence of the mechanisms which would link biological forces with the complex social behaviour

exhibited by human beings across the world. Rippon (2020: xx–xxi) argues that 'we are coming to realise that nature is inextricably entangled with nurture. What used to be thought fixed and inevitable is being shown to be plastic and flexible; the powerful biology-changing effects of our physical and social worlds are being revealed.'

Theories that see individuals as complying with innate predispositions underplay or neglect the social character of human action, and the social constructionist approach has now become dominant in the sociology of gender and sexuality. One area where constructionism has had a major influence is in the exploration of how gender identities are formed.

> ## THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> How secure is the distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender? What real-world examples are there which suggest that sex as well as gender is a social construction?

Gender identity

In the sociology of race and ethnicity, 'whiteness' was seen for many years as 'normal' and other ethnicities as somehow 'different'. Indeed, in everyday life, official data collection and many academic studies in the Global North, whiteness was not seen as a form of ethnic identification at all (Back and Ware 2001). In a similar way, gender was once seen as almost entirely 'about' the experience of women, as men and male behaviour were represented as the essentially 'ungendered' norm from which women deviated. Today such views are seen as stereotypical and wildly inaccurate.

In sociology, a productive early approach to gender differences is gender socialization – the learning of gender roles via social agencies such as the family, state and mass media. This approach distinguishes biological sex from social-cultural gender; an infant is born with the first but develops the second. Through contact with various agencies of socialization, both primary and secondary, children gradually internalize the social norms and expectations that, according to

dominant ideas, correspond to their biological sex. Hence, gender differences are not biologically determined but culturally produced as men and women are socialized into different roles. Theories of gender socialization see boys and girls learning 'sex roles' and the male and female identities – involving masculine and feminine norms – that accompany them.

Gender stereotyping has been found on many social media sites. Bailey et al. (2013) found that girls remained particularly at risk of harsh criticism online, for example, if their social media profile was open, if they posted what others considered 'too much' information or if they had 'too many' friends. Such 'offences' were likely to lead to girls being labelled 'slut' or similar, something that did not apply to boys behaving in the same way.

Social influences on gender identity flow through many diverse channels and tend to be largely indirect and unnoticed, and even parents committed to raising their children in 'non-sexist' ways find existing patterns of gender learning difficult to combat (Statham 1986). The toys, picture books and television programmes experienced by young children all tend to emphasize difference between male and female attributes. Male characters generally outnumber females in most children's books, magazines, television programmes and films, and boys tend to play more active, adventurous roles, while females are portrayed as passive, expectant and domestically oriented (Davies 1991; Grogan 2008).

We're pretty traditional around here. I handle everything on the domestic front except security.

Feminist researchers have demonstrated how cultural and media products aimed at young audiences embody stereotypical, gendered representations of girls and boys and their expected ambitions. In a series of four projects, Smith and Cook (2008) found persistent disparities in the presentation of male and female characters in movies. In popular G-rated (general or 'family' viewing) movies between 1990 and 2005, only 28 per cent of the active speaking characters were female, while 85 per cent of narrators were male. A wider study of 400 films across the rating scale also found two contrasting representations of women: the traditional parent in a committed relationship or the attractive, alluring woman with an unrealistic body shape, including thin, small waist and 'hourglass' figure (ibid.: 12–14). Unrealistic body proportions were also much more likely to be found in animated female characters in television programmes and cartoons for the under-elevens than in 'live action' ones, as was 'sexually revealing clothing' (which reveals body parts between the neck and knees). Even in the twenty-first century, therefore, gender stereotyping remains a persistent feature of media output aimed at children.

A growing body of evidence has found widespread dissatisfaction among girls and young women with their own bodies, partly as a result of comparing themselves with the airbrushed, perfected female role models which predominate in glossy magazines, on television and in film (American Psychological Association 2010). The spread of digital technologies, which allow for the manipulation of bodies in photographs and on video, means that young people now face even more idealized and unrealistic media representations than did previous generations. This problem is especially acute in magazines, which have a powerful impact on the attitudes of regular readers (Grogan 2008: 108–9; see also Wykes and Gunter 2005).

A more detailed discussion of gender socialization is in chapter 14, 'The Life Course'.

Interactionists argue that socialization is not a smooth process, as different socializing agencies may be at odds with one another in a more conflictual process, with more uncertain outcomes than gender socialization theories often suggest. Just as seriously, socialization theories underplay the ability of individuals to reject or modify social expectations in their actual practices (Stanley and Wise 1993, 2002). It is more accurate to say that socializing agencies offer opportunities for people to *take part* in gendered practices, but this does not mean that gender identity is *determined*. Children do resist socialization pressures. Some boys mix masculine and feminine elements, while some girls determinedly pursue competitive sports, and both boys and girls behave differently in private to the conventional gendered face they present in public (Connell 1987). The interactionist critique is an important one. Human beings are not passive, unquestioning recipients of gender 'programming' but actively engage with the process, modifying or rejecting pre-scripted gender roles, however powerful these may appear.

For a discussion of the social construction of bodies, see [chapter 10](#), 'Health, Illness and Disability'.

In the gender socialization approach, a biological distinction between two sexes provides a framework which becomes 'culturally elaborated' in society. By contrast, social constructionist theorists increasingly reject any biological basis for gender differences. Gender identities emerge in relation to *perceived* sex differences in society and in turn help to shape those differences. For example, a society in which ideas of masculinity are characterized by physical strength and 'tough' attitudes will encourage men to cultivate a specific body image and set of mannerisms different from those of societies with different masculine norms. In short, gender identities and sex differences are inextricably linked within individual lived bodies (Connell 1987; Scott and Morgan 1993; Butler 1990).

Not only is gender a social creation that lacks a fixed 'essence', but the human body itself is subject to individual choices and social forces which shape and alter it. People give their bodies meanings which challenge what is thought of as 'natural', choosing to construct and reconstruct them using exercise, dieting, piercings and cosmetic surgery. Transgender people may undergo gender reassignment surgery to reshape the physical body, facilitating the performance of their gender identity. Medical and technological interventions blur the boundaries of the physical body, opening it to quite radical change.

However, these apparently 'free' individual choices are still linked to wider social norms of the ideal body size and shape, social trends and commercial pressures associated with marketing and the fashion industry.

[Social constructions of gender and sexuality](#)

Sexuality is considered by many people to be a private and highly personal matter, and, until quite recently, much of what is known about human sexuality came from sociobiologists, medical researchers and 'sexologists'. Sociobiologists such as Barash (1979) argued that there is an evolutionary explanation for the widely reported sexual promiscuity of males. Men produce millions of sperm during a lifetime and can be seen as biologically disposed to impregnate as many women as possible. However, women produce only a few hundred eggs over a lifetime and have to carry the foetus for nine months, which explains why women are not as sexually promiscuous as men. Many scholars are dismissive of this kind of approach.

Rose (Rose et al. 1984: 145) notes that, unlike most other animals, 'The human infant is born with relatively few of its neural pathways already committed', illustrating that human behaviour is shaped more by the environment than genetically programmed instincts. Similarly, Norbert Elias (1987a) argues that the human capacity to learn *is* an evolutionary development, but in humans the balance between learned and unlearned behaviour has tilted decisively in favour of the former. As a consequence, humans not only *can* learn more than other species, they *must* learn more in order to participate successfully in increasingly diverse and complex societies. Biological evolution is overlain with social development in human societies, and all attempts to explain the latter by reference to the former are reductionist and inadequate, as neuroscientists such as Rippon (2020) also acknowledge.

The 'natural differences' school of thought argues that social inequalities of class, gender and 'race' are rooted in biological difference. The existing division of labour must also be 'natural', with women and men performing those tasks for which they are best suited. Thus, the anthropologist George Murdock saw it as both practical and convenient that women should concentrate on domestic and family responsibilities while men work outside the home. On the basis of a cross-cultural study of more than 200 societies, Murdock (1949) concluded that the sexual division of labour is present in *all* cultures. While this is not the result of biological 'programming', he argued that it is the most logical basis for the organization of society.

Talcott Parsons was particularly interested in the socialization of children and maintained that stable, supportive families are the key to successful socialization (Parsons and Bales 1956). In Parsons's view, the family operates most efficiently with a clear-cut sexual division of labour in which females act in *expressive* roles, providing care and security to children and offering them emotional support. Men, on the other hand, should perform *instrumental* roles – namely, being the breadwinner in the family. This complementary division of labour, springing from a biological distinction between the sexes, would ensure the solidarity of the family unit.

Feminists sharply criticized such claims, arguing that there is nothing natural or inevitable about the allocation of tasks in society. Parsons's view on the 'expressive' female has also been attacked by feminists and other sociologists who see such views as condoning the domination of women in the home. There is no basis to the belief that the 'expressive' female is necessary for the smooth operation of the family – rather, it is a social role promoted largely for the convenience of men. Sociologists today do not accept that complex human behaviour can be explained by reference to a fixed 'human nature' or the biological 'essence' of men and women. The attempt to do so is known as essentialism, and the history of sociological theories from the early twentieth century onwards has been the steady movement away from essentialist assumptions.

Nonetheless, essentialist arguments continually resurface in scientific work. In the 1990s, a scientific study comparing male 'gay', male 'straight' and 'female' brains claimed to have discovered that one of the four anterior regions of the hypothalamus area tended to be smaller in gay men than in straight men, resembling that of the female brain (LeVay 1993). The study was seen as suggesting a biological foundation to homosexuality and was widely reported in the media – also bringing positive comment from some gay rights campaigners, who saw this as supportive of their claim for equal civil rights.

Rahman and Jackson (2010) argue that this study illustrates the deep flaws embedded within essentialist thinking. How did the researchers know that the 'straight brains' were from 'straight men'? It seems this was simply an assumption based on the lack of any contrary self-

reporting or evidence from their medical records. Yet what we have learned from Kinsey's 1950s research and Laud Humphreys' (1970) study of American 'tearooms' (see [chapter 2](#)) is that a significant number of publicly 'straight' men also engage in same-sex sexual activity which they keep hidden: 'In a classically essentialist mode of thinking, LeVay conflates identity with behaviour, without knowing anything about the actual behaviour exhibited by these subjects' (Rahman and Jackson 2010: 121). Similarly, the brains of 'gay' men were taken from men who had died of AIDS-related illnesses, and the researchers could not have known what these men's patterns of sexual behaviour had been either.

What makes essentialism initially plausible is the apparently incontrovertible 'fact' that there are two biological sexes – male and female – which form the basis for understanding gender differences and sexuality. But historians and sociologists have shown this assumption to be false. Before the mid-eighteenth century, Western cultures held a presumption that there was only *one sex*, which varied along a behavioural continuum from femininity to masculinity, and the perception of two distinct sexes emerged only from the mid-eighteenth century (Laqueur 1990). Some people have an intersex condition, in which their reproductive or sexual anatomy 'doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of male or female' (ISNA 2015). But which of these variations 'counts' as intersex is socially constructed and therefore not purely biological. These examples show that what it means to be a 'man' or a 'woman', or to be 'gay' or 'straight', is not fixed by biology.

In the Global North, sexuality is linked to individual identity, and the prevailing idea is that 'homosexuals' or 'heterosexuals' are people whose [sexual orientation](#) lies within themselves and is primarily a personal matter. And, despite the progress that has clearly been made towards sexual equality in many societies, same-sex relationships are not universally legal, and lesbian and gay people still face prejudice and discrimination.

McIntosh (1968) was among the first to argue that homosexuality was not a 'medical condition' but a *social role* that did not exist in many societies. She maintained that, in England, 'the homosexual role' came into being only at the end of the seventeenth century. McIntosh also

argued that evidence from Kinsey's research projects in the 1940s and 1950s into the varied sexual practices of adults in the USA (see ['Classic studies' 7.1](#)) showed that the apparently distinct identities of 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' were not as polarized as the contrast implies. For instance, many 'heterosexual' men reported they had also engaged in same-sex activities with other men. Today there is a developing body of research studies exploring the diversity of men who have sex with men (MSM) (Shang and Zhang 2015).
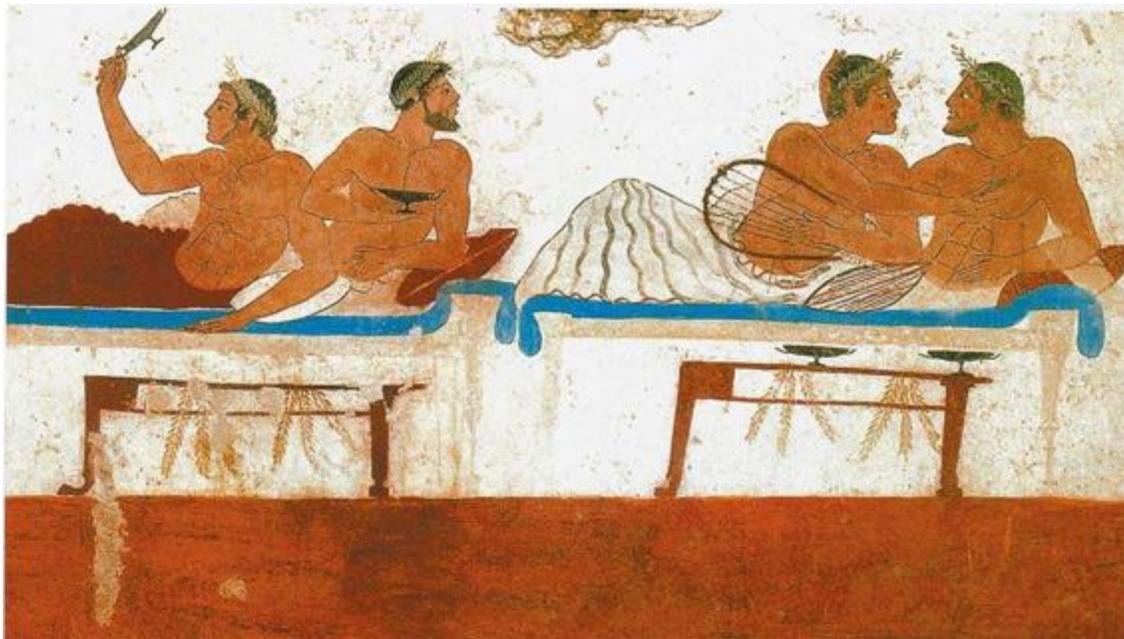
In ancient Greece, same-sex relationships were governed by social codes but not prohibited. Same-sex relationships have been legal in the UK only since 1967.

In his studies of sexuality, Michel Foucault (1978) showed that, before the eighteenth century, the notion of a homosexual identity seems barely to have existed in Europe. The act of 'sodomy' was denounced by Church authorities and the law, and in England and several other European countries it was punishable by death. However, sodomy was not defined exclusively as a homosexual offence; it also applied to sexual acts between men and women or men and animals. The term 'homosexuality' was coined only in the 1860s, and, from then on, lesbians and gay men were increasingly regarded as being distinct types of people with a particular sexual aberration (Weeks 1986). The

term 'gay' has generally been used to refer to males, as in the widely used phrase 'gay and lesbian' people, though it is increasingly used to describe lesbians too.

Homosexuality became part of a 'medicalized' discourse, spoken of in clinical terms as a psychiatric disorder or perversion rather than as a religious 'sin'. 'Homosexuals', along with other 'sexual deviants' such as paedophiles and transvestites, were seen as suffering from a biological pathology that threatened the wholesomeness of mainstream society. Until just a few decades ago, same-sex relations remained a criminal activity in virtually all Western countries.

Researching sexual practices

Until Alfred Kinsey's research in the USA in the 1940s and 1950s, sexuality and sexual behaviour were viewed as beyond the bounds of sociological interest and were largely ignored. Many people were shocked and surprised at Kinsey's research findings, which revealed a wide divergence between public understanding, social norms and actual sexual practices. We can speak much more confidently about public values concerning sexuality than we can about private practices, which, by their nature, go mostly undocumented. Read 'Classic studies' 7.1 (below) at this point.

[Classic studies 7.1](#) Uncovering sexual diversity in the USA

Do public norms of sexuality really govern people's actual sexual behaviour? Are sexually 'deviant' practices limited to just a tiny minority? To address these questions, Alfred Kinsey (1894–1956) and his research team set out to collect evidence from the white population of 1940s America. The team faced condemnation from religious organizations, and their work was denounced as immoral in newspapers and even in Congress. But they persisted and eventually obtained sexual life histories from 18,000 people, a reasonably representative sample of the white American population (Kinsey 1948, 1953).

Kinsey's findings

Kinsey's research findings were surprising because they did indeed reveal a large difference between public expectations and sexual conduct as described by people in the sample. The survey found that almost 70 per cent of men had visited a prostitute and 84 per cent had had premarital sexual experiences (a shocking figure at the time). Yet, following the sexual double standard, 40 per cent of men also expected their wives to be virgins at marriage. More than 90 per cent of men said they had engaged in masturbation and nearly 60 per cent in some form of oral sexual activity. Among women, around 50 per cent had had premarital sexual experiences, mostly with prospective husbands, while 60 per cent had masturbated and the same percentage engaged in oral–genital contact. The study also showed much higher levels of male same-sex activity than expected.

The gap between publicly accepted attitudes and actual behaviour that Kinsey's findings demonstrated was especially great in that particular period, just after the Second World War. A phase of sexual liberalization had begun rather earlier, in the 1920s, when many younger people felt freed from the strict moral codes that had governed earlier generations. Sexual behaviour probably changed a good deal, but issues concerning sexuality were not openly

discussed in ways with which people today are now familiar. Individuals participating in sexual activities that were still strongly disapproved of on a public level concealed them, not realizing the full extent to which many others were engaging in similar practices.

Critical points

Kinsey's research was controversial in the USA and was attacked by conservative and religious organizations. For example, one aspect of the studies explored the sexuality of children under sixteen years of age, and many critics objected to their involvement as research subjects. Religious leaders also claimed that open discussion of sexual behaviour would undermine Christian moral values. Academic critics argued that Kinsey's positivist approach collected much raw data, but the study failed to grasp either the complexity of sexual desire underpinning the diverse behaviour he uncovered or the meanings people attach to their sexual relationships. Later surveys also found lower levels of same-sex experience than did Kinsey, suggesting that his sample may have been less representative than the team first thought.

Contemporary significance

Kinsey is widely seen as a founder of the scientific study of sex and sexuality. His findings were instrumental in challenging the widespread view that homosexuality was a form of mental illness requiring treatment. It was only in the more 'permissive' era of the 1960s, which brought openly declared attitudes more in line with the reality of sexual activity that Kinsey's findings were accepted as realistic. Kinsey died in 1956, but the Institute for Sex Research, which he headed, continues its research today and has produced much valuable information about contemporary sexual behaviour. In 1981 it was renamed the Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction to celebrate his contribution to scientific research in this field.

In most of the industrialized countries before the 1960s, sex was a taboo subject, not to be discussed in the public realm or, for many, even in private. Thus those who were prepared to come forward for

interview were essentially a self-selected sample, unrepresentative of the general population. This reticence has changed somewhat since the 1960s, a time when social movements associated with counter-cultural ideas of 'free love' challenged existing attitudes and broke with established sexual norms. Yet we must be careful not to exaggerate their impact. Once the movements of the 1960s became assimilated into mainstream society, older norms relating to sex and sexuality continued to exert an influence. For example, some have argued that a 'new fidelity' emerged in the late 1980s, partly as a result of concerns about the risks associated with the transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections (Laumann 1994). One important lesson from Kinsey's studies is that publicly stated attitudes may reflect people's understanding of existing public norms rather than accurately describing their private beliefs.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Kinsey's research was conducted over sixty-five years ago and much has changed since then. Discuss this research with a sample of your friends and relatives across the age range. Given more recent evidence on contemporary sexuality, have Kinsey's findings proved to be realistic or unfounded?

Sources of evidence on sexual activity

The validity of surveys of sexual behaviour has been the focus of much debate (Lewontin 1995). Critics argue that surveys simply do not generate reliable information about sexual practices. For instance, a survey of the sexual activities of young people in rural northern Tanzania compared data collected using five different methods: biological markers, such as the presence of a sexually transmitted disease (STI), a face-to-face questionnaire, an assisted selfcompleted questionnaire, in-depth interviews, and participant observation (Plummer et al. 2004). It found many inconsistencies across the different methods. Five out of six young women with an existing STI reported during in-depth interviews having had sex, but only one of the six in the questionnaires did so. Overall, in either of the two

questionnaires, only 58 per cent of young men and 29 per cent of young women with biological markers of sexual activity reported any sexual activity.

The researchers found that, although the self-reporting data were 'fraught with inconsistencies', in-depth interviews seemed most effective in generating accurate information from the young women, while participant observation was the most useful method for uncovering the nature, complexity and extent of sexual activity in this particular population. However, in many developed countries where public discussion of sexual matters has become more acceptable, questionnaires may yield more reliable data.

Many studies of sexual behaviour have taken the form of attitude and behaviour surveys using postal questionnaires or face-to-face interviews. But evidence in this area can also be collected through the analysis and interpretation of documentary materials such as personal diaries, oral history, magazines, newspapers, social media accounts and other published and unpublished historical materials. These research methods are not mutually exclusive and, as the two studies below show, can be combined to produce a richer account of sexual behaviour in societies.

A large-scale survey by Rubin (1990) interviewed 1,000 Americans between the ages of thirteen and forty-eight to discover what changes had occurred in sexual behaviour and attitudes since the Kinsey studies. The author found that there had been some significant shifts. Sexual activity was typically beginning at a younger age than in the previous generation, and the sexual practices of teenagers tended to be as varied and comprehensive as those of adults. There was still a gendered sexual double standard, but it was not as powerful as it once had been. One of the most important changes was that women had come to expect, and actively pursue, sexual pleasure in their relationships. They expected to receive, not only to provide, sexual satisfaction.

Rubin discovered that women were more sexually liberated than previously, but most men in the survey found such female assertiveness difficult to accept, often saying they 'felt inadequate', were afraid they

could 'never do anything right' and thought it was 'impossible to satisfy women these days'. This finding seems to contradict much of what we have come to expect about gender relations. Men continue to dominate in most spheres, and they are, in general, more violent towards women than vice versa. Such violence is substantially aimed at the control and continuing subordination of women. Yet a number of research studies have also argued that masculinity is a burden as well as a source of rewards, and, were they to stop using sexuality as a means of control, men would benefit as much as women.

The studies by Rubin and Wouters (see 'Global society' 7.1) share some similarities. Both are concerned with changes over time in gender relations, norms of sexual behaviour, and private and public attitudes towards sexuality. While Rubin's study tells us something of how people feel about such changes and what impact they have on contemporaneous lifestyles, Wouters's analysis of primary documents sets the contemporary findings into historical and comparative perspective. Bringing together the findings from studies using such different methods, which also focus on different aspects of changing sexual behaviour, gives sociologists more confidence in their conclusions in this difficult-to-research area.

[Global society 7.1](#) Sex and manners in comparative perspective

The use of documentary materials to study changing forms of sexual behaviour is well demonstrated in *Sex and Manners*, by the Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters (2004), a comparative study of shifting gender relations and sexuality in England, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA. Wouters studied books on 'good manners' from the end of the nineteenth century to the end of the twentieth, particularly as these pertained to gender relations and 'courting behaviour' – the opportunities for and limitations on meetings and 'dating' between men and women. Manners books offer advice on how such meetings should be conducted, providing codes of manners on how to meet and behave in relations with 'the opposite sex'.

For instance, in England, a 1902 publication, *Etiquette for Women*, advised that 'It is the man's place to pay for what refreshments are had, if the ladies do not insist on paying their share; and if he invited the ladies with him to go in somewhere and have some, then the case is simple enough.' But by the 1980s the practice of 'going Dutch' – sharing the cost of a date – was commonplace and well established. A manners book from 1989, reflecting on the old practice of men always paying for women, noted that 'some still do, but women can't dine endlessly without offering a crust in return' (Wouters 2004: 25–7). This example seems fairly trivial, but in fact it shows that shifting gender relations in the wider society, with more women moving into paid employment and the public sphere more generally, were also leading to changing behavioural norms in relations between men and women.
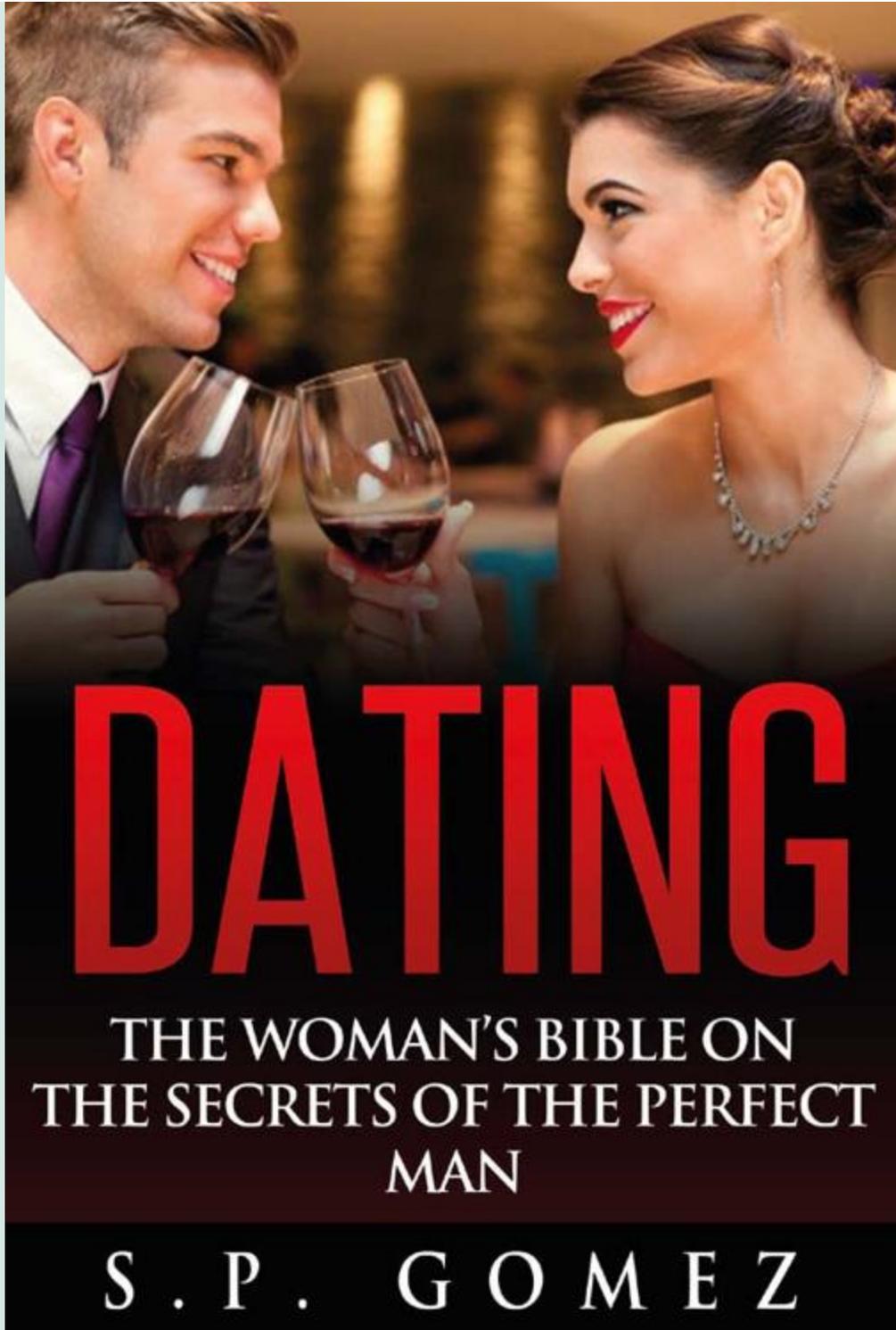
Etiquette manuals are not of mere historical interest for sociologists. Today there are books, magazine and newspaper columns, and websites on dating etiquette, especially the art of 'finding the right man'.

Wouters's research provides many examples in relation to sexual behaviour and courtship. By analysing manners books over the course of a century and relating the advice given in these to sociological theories of social change, Wouters argues that the four countries all exhibit a long-term trend, away from very formal and rigid codes of manners and towards much more informal codes that allow for a wider range of acceptable courtship behaviour. Hence, those critics of 1960s 'permissiveness' fail to appreciate that such changes are part of a much longer and deeper process of social transformation.

Sexuality, religion and morality

The world's societies exhibit a wide variety of attitudes towards sexual behaviour, and attitudes shift considerably over time even within one national society. For example, Western attitudes to sexuality for nearly 2,000 years were moulded primarily by Christianity. Although different Christian sects and denominations have held divergent views about the proper place of sexuality, the dominant view has been that sexual behaviour should be controlled. This has often produced an extreme prudishness in society at large. At other times many people ignored or reacted against the teachings of the Church, commonly engaging in practices, such as adultery, that were forbidden by religious authorities.

In the nineteenth century, religious assumptions about sexuality were partly replaced by medical ones. Most of the early writings by doctors about sexual behaviour were as stern as the views of the Church. Some argued that any type of sexual activity unconnected with reproduction would cause serious physical harm. Masturbation was said to bring on blindness, insanity, heart disease and other ailments, while oral sex was claimed to cause cancer. In the early twentieth-century USA, many doctors argued against contraception and abortion, with one doctor declaring them as constituting 'a direct war against human society' (Scott 2018: 80). In Victorian times, sexual hypocrisy abounded. Virtuous women were believed to be indifferent to sexuality, accepting the attentions of their husbands only as a duty. Yet in the expanding towns and cities, where prostitution was rife and often openly

tolerated, 'loose' women were seen as being in an entirely different category from their respectable sisters.

Many Victorian men who, on the face of things, were sober, well-behaved citizens, devoted to their wives, also regularly visited prostitutes or kept mistresses. Such behaviour was treated leniently, whereas 'respectable' women who took lovers were regarded as scandalous and, if their behaviour came to light, shunned in public society. The different attitudes towards the sexual activities of men and women formed a double standard which has long existed and whose residues still linger on today (Barret-Ducrocq 1992).

Today traditional attitudes exist alongside more liberal views of sex and sexuality, which developed particularly strongly from the 1960s. Sexual scenes in films and plays are shown that would previously have been unacceptable, and pornographic material is readily available online. Among those with strong religious beliefs, some see premarital sex as wrong and generally frown on all forms of sexuality that depart from heterosexuality. Yet it is more commonly accepted that sexual pleasure is a desirable and important feature of intimate relations for everyone. Sexual attitudes have undoubtedly become more liberal since the mid-twentieth century in most of the industrialized countries, even though, globally, religious and traditional norms relating to sexuality continue to exert an influence on attitudes and values.

THINKING CRITICALLY

In what ways are your attitudes towards sex and sexuality different from those of your parents and older relatives? Is there any religious element involved? In which areas of gender and sexuality is the gap in attitudes between your generation and older ones the widest?

Heterosexuality has historically been promoted as the basis for child-rearing and family life despite the existence of a variety of sexual orientations and identities. Lorber (1994) distinguishes as many as ten sexual identities: straight woman, straight man, lesbian woman, gay man, bisexual woman, bisexual man, transvestite woman (a woman

who regularly dresses as a man), transvestite man (a man who regularly dresses as a woman), transsexual woman (a man who becomes a woman) and transsexual man (a woman who becomes a man). However, we should note that, today, what Lorber calls 'transsexual man/woman' are actually forms of *gender* identity rather than sexual identity, as is reflected in the changed terminology from 'transsexual' to 'transgender' in contemporary discourse.

Lorber also discusses the variety of sexual practices. For example, a man or woman can have sexual relations with women, with men or with both, and this can happen one at a time or with three or more participating. One can have sex with oneself (masturbation) or with no one (celibacy). One can have sexual relations with trans women, trans men, people who erotically cross-dress, use pornography or sexual devices, practise sado-masochism (the erotic use of bondage and the inflicting of pain), and probably many more. All societies exhibit sexual norms that approve of some sexual practices while discouraging or outlawing others. For example, sexual norms in Western cultures have long been linked to ideas of romantic love and family relationships. Norms vary widely across cultures. Same-sex relations are a case in point. Some cultures have either accepted or actively encouraged same-sex relations in certain contexts. Among the ancient Greeks, for instance, the love of men for boys was idealized as the highest form of sexual love.

Increasingly the toned, muscular and sexualized male body is used in fashion and advertising campaigns. Is this development a small sign of growing gender equality?

An extensive study carried out in the mid-twentieth century by Ford and Beach (1951) surveyed anthropological evidence from more than 200 societies. Striking variations were found in what is regarded as 'natural' sexual behaviour and in norms of sexual attractiveness. In the West, a slim, small body was admired, while in other cultures a much more generous shape is regarded as most attractive. Some societies placed great store on the shape of the face, while others emphasized the shape and colour of the eyes or the size and form of the nose and lips. The variety of accepted types of sexual behaviour is one important piece of evidence that most sexual responses are learned rather than innate.

Gender inequality

Gender is a significant form of social stratification as well as a key factor in structuring the opportunities and life chances of people in all spheres of social life. The prevailing division of labour between the sexes has led to men and women assuming unequal positions in terms of power, prestige and wealth. Despite the advances that women have made around the world, gender divisions continue to serve as the basis for inequality. Investigating and accounting for gender inequality has become a central concern, and several theoretical perspectives have been advanced to explain men's enduring dominance over women. This section focuses on theoretical approaches, as the empirical evidence of gender inequality in specific settings and institutions is covered in other chapters.

Evidence on gender inequality is introduced and discussed in chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class', chapter 6, 'Global Inequality', and chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

Feminist perspectives

The feminist movement has given rise to a large body of theory which attempts to explain gender inequality. These feminist theories contrast markedly with each other. Competing schools have sought to interpret gender inequalities through a variety of deeply embedded social processes, such as sexism, patriarchy and capitalism. We begin by looking at the major strands of feminism in the West during the twentieth century: liberal, socialist (or Marxist) and radical feminism. The distinction between these has never been clear-cut, and in recent decades new forms have also emerged – such as postmodern feminism – which cut across the earlier strands (Barker 1997).

Liberal feminism

Liberal feminism looks for explanations of gender inequalities in social and cultural attitudes. An important early contribution to liberal feminism came from the English philosopher John Stuart Mill, in his essay *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which called for legal and political equality between the sexes, including the right to vote. Unlike radical and socialist feminists, liberal feminists do not see women's subordination as part of a larger system or structure. Instead, they draw attention to many separate factors. For example, since the early 1970s, liberal feminists have campaigned against sexism and discrimination against women in the workplace, educational institutions and the media. They tend to focus on establishing and protecting equal opportunities for women through legislation and other democratic means. In the UK, legal advances such as the Equal Pay Act (1970) and the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) were actively supported by liberal feminists, who argued that enshrining equality in law is an important step in eliminating discrimination against women. Liberal feminists work through the existing system to bring about reforms in a gradual way. In this respect, they are more moderate in their aims and methods than many radical and socialist feminists, who call for an overthrow of the existing system.

While liberal feminists have contributed greatly to the advancement of women over the past century, critics charge that they are unsuccessful in dealing with the root causes of gender inequality and do not acknowledge the systemic nature of women's oppression in society. By focusing on the independent deprivations which women suffer – sexism, discrimination, the 'glass ceiling', unequal pay – liberal feminists draw only a partial picture of gender inequality. Radical feminists accuse liberal feminists of encouraging women to accept an unequal society and its competitive character.

Socialist and Marxist feminism

Socialist feminism developed from Marx's conflict theory, although Marx himself had little to say about gender inequality. It has been critical of liberal feminism for its perceived inability to see that there are powerful interests in society that are hostile to equality for women

(Bryson 1993). Socialist feminists have sought to defeat both patriarchy and capitalism (Mitchell 1966). It was Marx's friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels who did more than Marx to provide an account of gender equality from a Marxist perspective.

Engels argued that, under capitalism, material and economic factors underlay women's subservience to men, because patriarchy (like class oppression) has its roots in private property. Engels maintained that capitalism intensifies patriarchy by concentrating wealth and power in the hands of a small number of men. Capitalism intensifies patriarchy more than earlier social systems because it creates enormous wealth which confers power on men as wage-earners as well as possessors and inheritors of property. Second, for the capitalist economy to succeed, it must define people – in particular women – as consumers and persuade them that their needs will be met only through ever-increasing consumption of goods and products. Last, capitalism relies on women to labour for free in the home, caring and cleaning. To Engels, capitalism exploited men by paying low wages and women by paying no wages.

Housework and the domestic division of labour are discussed in chapter 17, 'Work and Employment', and chapter 15, 'Families and Intimate Relationships'.

Socialist feminists have argued that the reformist goals of liberal feminism are inadequate. They have called for the restructuring of the family, the end of 'domestic slavery', and the introduction of some collective means of carrying out child-rearing, caring and household maintenance. Following Marx, many argued that these ends would be achieved through a socialist revolution, which would produce true equality under a state-centred economy designed to meet the needs of all.

Radical feminism

At the heart of <u>radical feminism</u> is the belief that men are responsible for and benefit from the exploitation of women. The analysis of patriarchy – the systematic domination of females by males – is of central concern to this branch of feminism. Patriarchy is viewed as a universal phenomenon that has existed across time and cultures. Radical feminists often concentrate on the family as one of the primary sources of women's oppression in society. They argue that men exploit women by relying on the free domestic labour that women provide in the home. For example, even though women now make up a significant part of the workforce, they still do more household tasks than men, regardless of how much they earn or how many hours of formal work they do. Lyonette and Crompton (2015: 37) argue that, despite some changes, domestic labour remains crucial to the process of 'doing gender'. As a group, men are also able to deny women access to many positions of power and influence in society through processes of group closure which effectively construct gendered barriers to entry.

Working-class women were involved in working coal in the early twentieth century. Is the concept and theory of patriarchy capable of capturing the very diverse work experiences and life chances of women in every social class and ethnic group?

Radical feminists differ in their interpretations of the basis of patriarchy, but most agree that it involves the appropriation of women's bodies and sexuality in some form. Shulamith Firestone (1970), an early radical feminist writer, argued that men control women's roles in reproduction and child-rearing. Because women are biologically able to give birth to children, they become dependent materially on men for protection and livelihood. This 'biological inequality' is socially organized in the nuclear family. Firestone wrote of a 'sex class' to describe women's social position and claimed that women can be emancipated only through the abolition of the family and the power relations which characterize it.

Other radical feminists point to male violence against women as central to male supremacy. According to such a view, domestic violence, rape and sexual harassment are all part of the systematic oppression of women rather than isolated cases with their own psychological or criminal roots. Even interactions in daily life – such as non-verbal

communication, patterns of listening and interrupting, and women's sense of safety in public – contribute to gender inequality. Moreover, popular conceptions of beauty and sexuality are imposed by men on women in order to produce a certain type of femininity. Social and cultural norms that emphasize a slim body and a caring, nurturing attitude towards men help to perpetuate women's subordination. The 'objectification' of women through the media, fashion and advertising turns women into sexual objects whose main role is to please and entertain men. Because patriarchy is a systemic phenomenon, say radical feminists, gender equality can be attained only by overthrowing the patriarchal order.

The main objection to radical feminism is that the concept of patriarchy is too general as an overarching explanation for women's oppression. Radical feminists have tended to claim that patriarchy has existed throughout history and across cultures – that it is a universal phenomenon. Such a conception needs to be amended or modified to take account of the influence of race, class and ethnicity on the nature of women's subordination. In other words, theorizing patriarchy as a universal phenomenon risks falling into biological reductionism – attributing all the complexities of gender inequality to the distinction between men and women.

Sylvia Walby advanced an important reconceptualization of patriarchy (see 'Using your sociological imagination' 7.1). She argues that the notion of patriarchy remains a valuable and useful explanatory tool, providing that it is used in certain ways.

In recent years, Walby and other feminist theorists have suggested that the concept of patriarchy has become too easy for opponents of feminism to misrepresent as an ahistorical, unchanging theory of male domination. Instead, she suggests its replacement with the concept of 'gender regimes' (see 'Classic studies' 7.2 below), which 'means the same as the term "patriarchy"' (Walby 2011: 104), but more readily suggests changes over time, can be used to analyse local, national and international institutions, and is therefore less likely to be misinterpreted.

Black feminism

Do the versions of feminism outlined above apply equally to the experiences of both white and non-white women? Many black feminists and feminists from the Global South claim they do not. They argue that the main feminist schools of thought, paradoxically, incline towards essentialism, debating the experience of 'women' as a general category while in practice being oriented to the white, predominantly middle-class women in the Global North. For example, Mohanty (1988) argued that the overgeneralized concept of the 'Third World Woman' was apparent in some Western feminist texts, which failed to differentiate the varied experiences of women in the Global South by social class, ethnicity, age group and geographical location. This monolithic characterization has been described as a form of unacknowledged 'discursive colonialism' within Western feminism (Parashar 2016: 371).

It is not valid to generalize about 'women's' subordination as a whole from the experience of one specific group. Black feminists contend that any theory of gender equality which does not take racism into account cannot be expected adequately to explain black women's oppression. Dissatisfaction with existing forms of feminism led to the emergence of a strand of thought which concentrates on the particular problems facing black women. For example, the American black feminist bell hooks (1997 – her name is written in lower-case) argues that some white feminist writers have seen black girls as having higher self-esteem than white girls, evidenced by their more confident and assertive manner. But hooks points out that these traits were instilled in girls by parents and teachers as a means of 'uplifting the race', and it does not follow that black girls who appear confident do not also feel worthless because of the social stigma attached to their skin colour or hair texture. Such apparently simple misunderstandings illustrate the underlying flaws in much mainstream feminist thinking, which black feminism aims to correct.

Black feminist writings tend to emphasize historical elements which inform the current problems facing black women. The writings of American black feminists emphasize the influence of the powerful legacy of slavery, segregation and the civil rights movement on gender inequalities in the black community. They point out that early black suffragettes supported the campaign for women's rights but realized

that the question of race could not be ignored: black women were discriminated against on the basis of both their race *and* their gender. In recent years, black women have not been central to the women's liberation movement in part because 'womanhood' dominated their identities much less than did concepts of race.

hooks has argued that some of the explanatory frameworks favoured by white feminists – for example, the view of the family as a mainstay of patriarchy – may not be applicable in black communities, where the family represents a main point of solidarity against racism. In other words, the oppression of black women may be found in different locations compared with that of white women.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

7.1 Theorizing patriarchy

Sylvia Walby reasoned that the concept of patriarchy is essential to any analysis of gender inequality but agreed that many criticisms of the concept are valid. In *Theorizing Patriarchy* (1990), she presented a way of understanding patriarchy that is more flexible than its predecessors. It allows room for change over historical time and for consideration of ethnic and class differences.

For Walby, patriarchy is 'a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women' (1990: 20). She sees patriarchy and capitalism as distinct systems which interact in different ways – sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in tension – depending on historical conditions. Capitalism, she argues, has generally benefited from patriarchy through the *sexual division of labour*. But, at other times, capitalism and patriarchy have been at odds with each other. For example, in wartime, when women have entered the labour market in great numbers, the interests of capitalism and patriarchy have not been aligned.

Walby recognizes that a weakness of early feminist theory was the tendency to focus on one 'essential' cause of women's oppression, such as male violence or women's role in reproduction. Because she is concerned with the depth and interconnectedness of gender inequality, she sees patriarchy as composed of six structures that are independent but interact with one another.

1. *Production relations in the household* Women's unpaid domestic labour, such as housework and childcare, is expropriated by her husband (or cohabitee).

2. *Paid work* Women in the labour market are excluded from certain types of work, receive lower pay, and are segregated in less skilled jobs.

3. *The patriarchal state* In its policies and priorities, the state has a systematic bias towards patriarchal interests.

4. *Male violence* Although male violence is often seen as composed of individualistic acts, it is patterned and systematic. Women routinely experience this violence and are affected by it in standard ways. The state effectively condones the violence with its refusal to intervene other than in exceptional cases.

5. *Patriarchal relations in sexuality* This is manifested in 'compulsory heterosexuality' and in the sexual double standard between men and women, in which different 'rules' for sexual behaviour apply.

6. *Patriarchal cultural institutions* A variety of institutions and practices – including media, religion and education – produce representations of women 'within a patriarchal gaze'. These representations influence women's identities and prescribe acceptable standards of behaviour and action.

Walby distinguishes two distinct forms of patriarchy. *Private patriarchy* is the domination of women which occurs within the household at the hands of an individual patriarch. It is an exclusionary strategy, because women are essentially prevented from taking part in public life. *Public patriarchy*, on the other hand, is more collective in form. Women are involved in public realms, such as politics and the labour market, but remain segregated from wealth, power and status. Walby contends that, at least in Britain, there has been a shift in patriarchy – both in degree and in form – from the Victorian era to the present day. If at one time women's oppression was found chiefly in the home, it is now woven through society as a whole. As Walby quips: 'Liberated from the home, women now have the whole of society in which to be exploited.'

Moreover, the very idea that there is a 'unified' form of gender oppression experienced equally by women across ethnic groups and social classes is problematic, as class divisions are a factor that cannot be ignored in the case of many black women. Therefore, an intersectional approach to inequality is needed that takes in gender, class and ethnic dimensions (Taylor and Hines 2012). Patricia Hill Collins (2000: 18) describes intersectionality as 'particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation'. Crenshaw (1991) argues that such an intersectional approach is a key strength of black feminist theory.

Intersectionality can also be seen as a methodology, bringing into focus the interplay between race, class, gender, disability, and so on, which aims to generate more comprehensive and valid accounts of differently positioned women's divergent experiences. Black women may then be seen as multiply disadvantaged, on the basis of their colour, gender and social class position. When these three factors interact, they may reinforce and intensify one another (Brewer 1993).

Postmodern feminism and queer theory

Like black feminism, postmodern feminism challenges the idea that there is a unitary basis of identity and experience shared by all women. This strand draws on the cultural phenomenon of postmodernism in the arts, architecture, philosophy and economics which has its roots in the ideas of Lyotard (1984), Derrida (1978, 1981) and Lacan (1995). Postmodern feminists reject the claim that there is a grand or overarching theory that can explain the position of women in society or, indeed, that there is a universal category of 'woman'. Consequently, they

reject other theories of gender inequality based on patriarchy, race or class as 'essentialist' (Beasley 1999).

Postmodernist approaches in sociology were introduced in [chapter 3](#), 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Instead, postmodernism encourages the acceptance of many different standpoints as equally valid. Rather than there being an essential core to womanhood, there are many individuals and groups, all of whom have very different experiences (heterosexuals, lesbians, black women, working-class women, and more). This 'otherness' of different groups and individuals is celebrated in all its diverse forms, and the emphasis on the positive side of 'otherness' is a major theme. Postmodern feminism accepts that there are many truths and social constructions of reality.

As well as the recognition of difference, postmodern feminists stress the importance of 'deconstruction'. In particular, they have sought to deconstruct male language and masculine views of the world. In its place is an attempt to create fluid, open terms and language which more closely reflect women's experiences. Many postmodern feminists argue that modern Western culture tends to divide the world using binary distinctions ('good versus bad', 'right versus wrong', 'beautiful versus ugly'). And, as we saw earlier, this means that men are cast as normal while the female is always cast in the role of the 'other' (Szitanyi 2020: 24). Deconstruction attacks all binary concepts, recasting their opposites in a new and positive manner.

The idea that, theoretically, it is possible to separate gender from sexuality altogether marks the starting point for queer theory, which breaks with many conventional sociological ideas on identity. Queer theory is heavily influenced by poststructuralist thought, particularly that associated with Judith Butler (1990) and Michel Foucault (1978). In particular, queer theorists challenge the very concept of 'identity' as something that is relatively fixed or assigned to people by socializing agents. Drawing on Foucault, queer theorists argue that gender and sexuality, along with all of the other terms that come with these concepts, constitute a specific *discourse* rather than referring to something objectively real or 'natural'.

For example, in his work on the history of sexuality during the 1970s and 1980s, Foucault argued that the male homosexual identity today associated with gay men was not part of the dominant discourse on sexuality in the nineteenth century or previously. Therefore, this form of identity just did not exist for people until it became part of, or was created within, the discourses of medicine and psychiatry. Identities can therefore be seen as pluralistic, unstable and subject to change over time.

This perspective is also applied to the identities of 'gay' and 'lesbian', which, like all other forms of identification, have become 'essentialized' in society. Queer theory therefore challenges all fixed or apparently 'authentic' identities, including those which appear to be opposed to the dominant heterosexual norm. Although concepts such as 'gay' and 'lesbian' may well have been politically useful in pressing claims for equal rights, queer theorists argue that they remain tied to the binary opposition, as the 'other' to the norm of heterosexuality, which

consistently favours the powerful 'heteronormative discourse' in society (Rahman and Jackson 2010: 128).

Queer theory may be viewed as a radical social constructionism that explores the process of *identity creation* and re-creation insofar as this relates to sexuality and gender. Some theorists argue that every major sociological topic as well as other subjects should bring queer voices to the centre to challenge the heterosexual assumptions that underlie much contemporary thought (Epstein 2002).

See [chapter 5](#), 'The Environment', for a discussion of the social constructionist approach.

Sociological critics argue that queer theory tends to study cultural texts (film, novels, and so on) and lacks support from empirical research. It also fails to explain the social structural grounding of sexual and gender categories in the material life created by capitalist economics and male dominance represented by the concept of patriarchy. Jackson (2001) argues that a materialist feminism which focuses on social structures, relations and practices still offers a better perspective for understanding gender inequality than culturally oriented postmodernism or queer theories. It may also be that many, maybe most, people do not experience their identity as being as fluid or shifting as queer theory suggests, but as something that is actually quite firm and fixed (Edwards 1998). If so, then the radical constructionism of queer theorists perhaps overestimates the extent of gender fluidity and shifting sexual identities.

Similarly, despite the criticism that the basic two-sex, male/female divide is inaccurate and theoretically unsustainable, many areas of social life remain rooted in that distinction between men and women. Jackson and Scott (2017) argue that 'The gender binary continues to be immutable at the level of both structure and practice and it continues to be extremely difficult to think outside of this binary.' For instance, as

Woodward (2015: 50) notes, 'in the field of sport there are two sexes.' She argues that sport is structured by a sex/gender system that influences all aspects, from athletic prowess to regulatory authorities. Most sports have separate competitions for men and women (including tennis singles, athletics and golf), and, until 2000, the International Olympic Committee adopted universal sex testing designed to prevent the unfairness of men passing as women. Since 2000, any 'suspicious' athlete can be requested to have a medical examination as part of a 'gender verification' process. Woodward argues that women who do not conform to conventional feminine appearance, behaviour and athletic performance are likely to be deemed 'suspicious'.

The muscular physique and strong performances of an eighteen-year-old South African 800 metre runner, Caster Semenya, fell foul of these criteria, and she was subject to medical testing by a gynaecologist, a gender expert, an endocrinologist and a psychologist. The results were made public by the International Federation of Athletics Associations (IAAF), causing her much distress. Semenya was from a relatively poor, rural village with few sports facilities, and her school friends insisted there has never been any question of her being anything but a girl. The head of South African athletics suggested that this case was not only about gender but also involved racism: 'Who are white people to question the makeup of an African girl?' (cited in Smith 2009). Woodward (2015: 54) concludes that 'Gender-verification testing has largely failed to recognize the possibility of women's athletic achievement; if they are any good they must be men.'

Gender verification is a good example of the complex issues involved when trying to unravel sex and gender today. On the one hand, it demonstrates that the binary oppositions of sex/gender and male/female are not adequate for understanding the diversity of physical, social and cultural factors in play. Yet, on the other hand, it shows that these binary oppositions remain deeply embedded within many social institutions which continue to shape and reproduce conventional social norms and expectations.

Feminist movements

The sociology of gender and sexuality did not pave the way for feminist and LGBTQ+ social movements; rather, the reverse is true. For a very long period sociology had very little to say about gender relations and sexuality, and it was not until feminist campaigns and movements began to raise new issues and, crucially, activists made their way into university departments that the discipline began to examine issues of sex, gender and sexuality. This section provides a whistle-stop tour of the chronological development of feminist and LGBTQ+ activism since the late nineteenth century.

The long-term development of feminist thought and social movements seeking to promote the rights of women is conventionally seen as passing through a series of three 'cycles of protest' or 'waves' (Whelehan 1999; Krolløke and Sørensen 2006). First-wave feminist movements arose in the context of industrialization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. First-wave feminism sought equal access to political power by extending voting rights to women on the same basis as men. The first wave also involved campaigns for equal opportunities for women and access to all of society's institutions, including higher education. Ideas and activities of the first wave continued throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Second-wave feminism originated within a broader movement for civil rights in the 1960s and 1970s, which involved students, black people's movements, lesbian and gay movements, and disabled people's movements (Valk 2008). It focused on ideas of women's 'liberation' and 'empowerment'. If the first-wave movement was influenced by liberal and socialist political ideals of equality before the law, the second wave was a more 'radical' movement for change. The idea that women as a social group were oppressed by their male-dominated, patriarchal society and its institutions was a radical shift. A keynote slogan for second-wave feminism was 'the personal is political' – a challenge to the common-sense notion that the private world of family life and domesticity was outside of the public realm of politics. Feminists saw personal and family issues as just as much a political arena as the world of public policy and formal politics (David 2003).

Second-wave feminism was closely linked to academic feminist research and theorizing, which produced a vibrant, activist movement

that engaged in many public protests and demonstrations. Feminists campaigned, among many other things, against beauty contests, the use of (hetero)sexist language, and male violence, both in the home and in aggressive national politics, and in favour of payment for housework as a valuable contribution to society. Such activism was underpinned by key feminist works, including Betty Friedan's (1963) *The Feminine Mystique*, Juliet Mitchell's (1971) *Women's Estate* and Shulamith Firestone's (1970) *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. The second wave also gave rise to attempts to connect feminism with existing political positions and ideologies such as socialism, Marxism and liberalism and to find ways of bringing feminist issues into discourses of class exploitation, capitalism and equal legal rights.

The second wave of feminism focused on the similarities among all women, promoting the idea that women as a group (or a 'class') had much in common with one another, regardless of social class position or geographical location in the world. However, from the early 1980s onwards, the insistence on a universal women's experience came under challenge from within the movement. A new focus on difference emerged as black, working-class women and lesbian feminists asked whether it made sense to think that differently situated groups of women really could share essentially similar interests (hooks 1981). The early second-wave feminism was seen as the product mainly of white, middle-class women with a particular view of the world which should not be illegitimately portrayed as universal. Spivak (1987) argued that it was naïve to suggest that relatively wealthy women in the developed countries could claim to speak on behalf of women in the much poorer regions of the developing world. By the mid-1990s, the universal ambition of early second-wave activists and theorists had effectively been ended by a new recognition that the fundamental characteristic of women's experience around the world was, in fact, difference.

Third-wave (or 'new') feminism developed in a very different social context to that faced by second-wave feminists (Gillis et al. 2007). Between the mid-1990s and the early twenty-first century, the world underwent major changes: globalization, the demise of Eastern European ('actually existing') communism, multiculturalism, global

terrorism, religious fundamentalisms, the digital revolution in communications, the spread of the internet, and genetic biotechnologies. A new generation of women was growing up in a less ordered and predictable world than the previous one and embraced cultural diversity and difference.

> This new 'new' feminism is characterized by local, national and transnational activism, in areas such as violence against women, trafficking, body surgery, self-mutilation, and the overall 'pornofication' of the media. While concerned with new threats to women's rights in the wake of the new global world order, it criticizes earlier feminist waves for presenting universal answers or definitions of womanhood and for developing their particular interests into somewhat static identity politics. (Krolløke and Sørensen 2006: 17)

One more recent theme is the attempt to reclaim the derogatory terms used to describe women – such as 'bitch' and 'slut' – rather than to try to prevent their use altogether. In 2011 a series of large-scale protests called 'SlutWalks' spread from Canada across the world following comments from a Toronto police officer that, in order to be safe, women should stop 'dressing like sluts'. The protesters made extensive use of the word 'slut' in their banners and badges, effectively reclaiming the word as representing independent women who claim the right to dress however they like without being sexually harassed or raped. In this way, activists aimed radically to alter the social meaning of the word, thereby completely reversing its previously negative meaning and defusing its stigmatizing impact.

Third-wave feminism is even more diverse than late second-wave forms, but it is important to acknowledge that many third-wave feminists have grown up with the benefit of the achievements of the second-wave movement. In this sense there is a line of development between the waves. In developed countries such as Britain, France and the USA, women's movements achieved many successes over the twentieth century during the first two waves of insurgent social movement activity. But some have argued that these countries have now moved into a 'post-feminist' phase (Tasker and Negra 2007) or that feminism is in a state of abeyance (but not dissolution), during

which the movement maintains itself by engaging in educational and intellectual action aimed at becoming firmly established within the political system (Bagguley 2002; Grey and Sawyer 2008).

However, Walby claims that these are misreadings of contemporary feminist activism. There are many movements and groups around the world that actively campaign to mainstream gender equality into government policies, even though many of them do not identify themselves as 'feminist'. Because of this, they tend to be influential but relatively invisible compared with the spectacular direct actions of second-wave feminism. Walby (2011: 1) insists that 'Feminism is not dead. This is not a postfeminist era. Feminism is still vibrant, despite declarations that it is over. Feminism is a success, although many gender inequalities remain. Feminism is taking powerful new forms, which make it unrecognizable to some.'

One example of the kind of feminism Walby alludes to is the UK-based online Everyday Sexism Project (http://everydaysexism.com/), which enables women to post their personal experiences of sexist language, behaviour and harassment in their daily life. The site includes many posts from girls and young women in school settings, on public transport, at work and when simply walking around their home towns. In cataloguing everyday sexism, the project reminds us that moves towards formal gender equality have not yet fundamentally changed an existing sexist culture of male dominance. Similarly, male sexual harassment and rape of women on university campuses in the UK and the USA have been the focus of research and campaign groups. A 2015 documentary film, *The Hunting Ground*, highlighted these issues using interviews with victims and university administrators from several US institutions. The film proved controversial as it suggested that some universities were slow to act when rape claims were made. Campaigns such as these show that third-wave feminism is vibrant and continues to involve many young women who may not even consider themselves and their activity as 'feminist'.

Protests reclaiming derogatory terms such as 'slut' and countering assumptions about the 'correct' dress code for women have been part of third-wave feminist activism.

The influence of feminist ideas and women's movements has been profound in Western societies but is increasingly challenging gender inequality in other areas of the world. Feminism is not merely an academic exercise, nor is it restricted to Western Europe and North America. In today's increasingly globalized world, there is a good chance that those who become active in national women's movements will inevitably come into contact with women pursuing other feminist struggles overseas.

Women's movements are discussed in [chapter 20](#), 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Although participants in women's movements cultivated ties to activists in other countries, the number and importance of such contacts have increased with globalization. One example is the United Nations Conference on Women, held four times since 1975. Approximately 50,000 people – of whom more than two-thirds were women – attended the last conference in Beijing, China, in 1995. Delegates from 181 nations attended, along with representatives from thousands of non-governmental organizations (Dutt 1996). The Platform for Action finally agreed to by the conference participants called on the countries of the world to address such issues as:

- the persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women
- violence against women
- the effects of armed or other kinds of conflict on women
- inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making
- stereotyping of women
- gender inequalities in the management of natural resources

- persistent discrimination against and violation of the rights of the girl child.

The uneven development of regions and societies means that many of the equal rights measures that people in the Global North take for granted have yet to be won in the Global South. It also illustrates how the global dimension of contemporary life offers new opportunities for women's movements to join together in the ongoing campaign for gender equality.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> The argument from queer theory is that there is no universal experience or identity of 'woman'. Does the acceptance of this position inevitably weaken feminist movements or are there ways in which it could lead to a broader solidarity?

The gender order

In *Gender and Power* (1987), *The Men and the Boys* (2001) and *Masculinities* (2005), Raewyn Connell set out one of the most complete theoretical accounts of gender, which has become something of a 'modern classic' (see 'Classic studies' 7.2). Her approach has been particularly influential because it integrates the concepts of patriarchy – the socially organized dominance of men over women – and masculinity into an overarching theory of gender relations.

Connell (1987) argues that empirical evidence on gender is not simply a 'shapeless heap of data' but reveals the basis of an 'organized field of human practice and social relations' through which women are kept in subordinate positions to men. Gender relations are the product of everyday interactions and practices, though the actions and behaviour of people in their personal lives are directly linked to collective arrangements in society. These arrangements are continuously reproduced over lifetimes and generations, but they are also subject to change.

Connell suggests there are three aspects which interact to form a society's gender order – patterns of power relations between masculinities and femininities that are widespread throughout society – namely, labour, power and cathexis (personal/sexual relationships). These three realms are distinct but interrelated and represent the main sites in which gender relations are constituted and constrained. *Labour* refers to the sexual division of labour both within the home (such as domestic responsibilities and childcare) and in the labour market (issues such as occupational segregation and unequal pay). *Power* operates through social relations such as authority, violence and ideology in institutions, the state, the military and domestic life. *Cathexis* concerns dynamics within intimate, emotional and personal relationships, including marriage, sexuality and child-rearing.

Gender relations, as they are enacted in these three areas, are structured on a societal level in a particular gender order. Connell uses the term gender regime to refer to the play of gender relations in smaller settings, such as a specific institution. Thus, a family, a neighbourhood and a state all have their own gender regimes. (One such gender regime is explored by Máirtín Mac an Ghaill in 'Using your sociological imagination' 7.2.)

[Classic studies 7.2](#) Connell on the dynamics of the gender order

The research problem

Why do some people become male and female role models? What characteristics and actions do role models display and how do those characteristics and actions (and not others) come to be widely seen as desirable? Connell (1987, 2001, 2005) explored such questions in her studies of the 'gender order' in societies. In particular, she developed a theory of the *gender hierarchy*.

Connell's explanation

Connell argues that there are many different expressions of masculinity and femininity. At the level of society, these contrasting versions are ordered in a hierarchy which is oriented around one defining premise – the domination of men over women ([figure 7.1](#)). Connell uses stylized 'ideal types' of masculinities and femininities in this hierarchy.

At the top of the hierarchy is [hegemonic masculinity](#), which is dominant over all other masculinities and femininities in society. 'Hegemonic' refers to the concept of hegemony – the social dominance of a certain group, exercised not through brute force but through a cultural dynamic which extends into private life and social realms. Thus, the media, education, ideology, even sports and music can all be channels through which hegemony is established. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity is associated first and foremost with heterosexuality and marriage, but also with authority, paid work, strength and physical toughness. Examples of men who embody hegemonic masculinity are film stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger, rapper 50 Cent and the former US president Donald Trump.
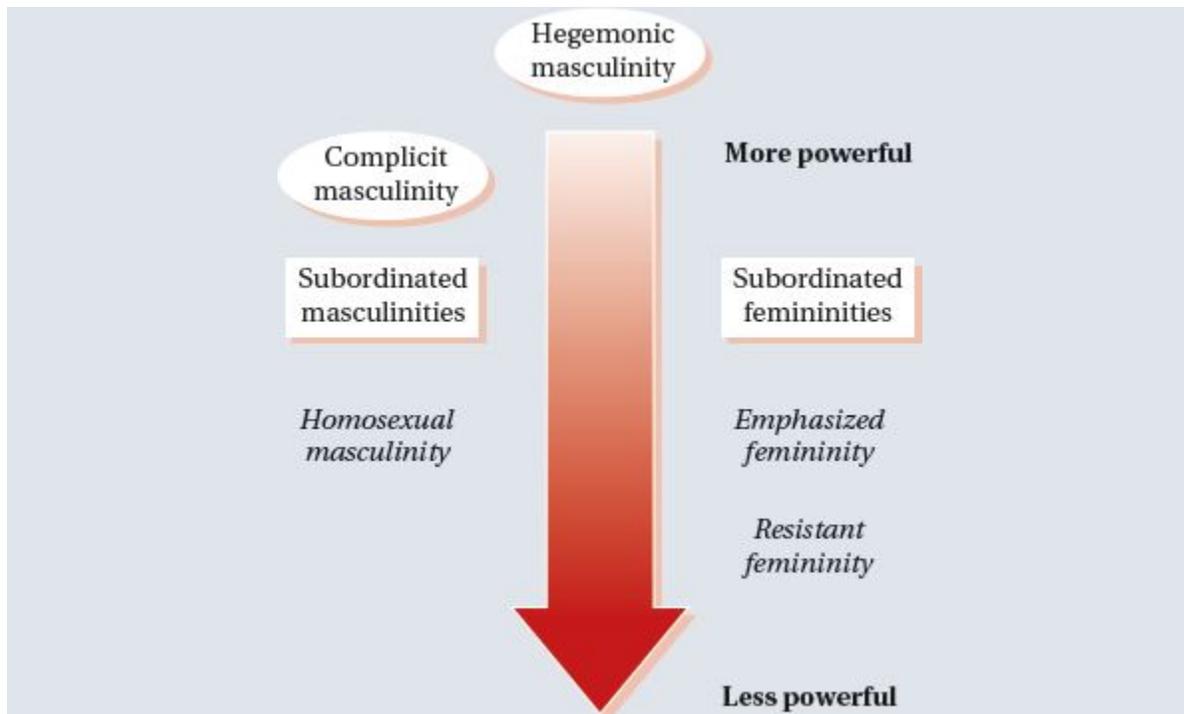
Figure 7.1 The gender hierarchy

Although hegemonic masculinity is held up as an ideal form of masculinity, only a few men in society can live up to it. A large number of men, however, still gain advantage from its dominant position in the patriarchal order. Connell refers to this as the 'patriarchal dividend' and to those who benefit from it as embodying complicit masculinity.

Existing in a subordinated relationship to hegemonic masculinity are a number of subordinated masculinities and femininities. Among subordinated masculinities, the most important is that of homosexual masculinity. In a gender order dominated by hegemonic masculinity, the homosexual is seen as the opposite of the 'real man'; he does not measure up to the hegemonic masculine ideal and often embodies many of its 'cast off' traits. Homosexual masculinity is stigmatized and ranks at the bottom of the gender hierarchy for men.

Connell argues that femininities are all formed in positions of subordination to hegemonic masculinity. One form – emphasized femininity – is an important complement to hegemonic masculinity.

It is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men and is characterized by 'compliance, nurturance and empathy'. Among young women it is associated with sexual receptivity, while among older women it implies motherhood. Connell refers to Marilyn Monroe as both 'archetype and satirist' of emphasized femininity and stresses that images of emphasized femininity remain highly prevalent in the media, advertising and marketing campaigns.

Finally, there are subordinated femininities, which reject the version of emphasized femininity outlined above. But, on the whole, the overwhelming attention devoted to maintaining emphasized femininity as the conventional norm in society means that other subordinated femininities which resist convention are not given voice. Among women who have developed nonsubordinated identities and lifestyles are feminists, lesbians, spinsters, midwives, witches, prostitutes and manual workers. The experiences of these [resistant femininities](#), however, are largely 'hidden from history'.

Critical points

Several critics have argued that, although hegemonic masculinity appears to be fairly obvious, Connell does not really present a satisfactory account of it. This is because she does not specify what would count as 'counterhegemonic'. For example, with more men now involved in childcare and parenting, is this part of or a trend against hegemonic masculinity? Unless we know what actions would challenge it, how can we know what actions constitute hegemonic masculinity in the first place? Some social psychologists also wonder *how* men come to 'embody' complicit masculinity; if they do not live up to the hegemonic masculine ideal themselves, what does this failure mean for them psychologically and what do they actually do? In short, 'What is missing is more fine-grain work on what complicity and resistance look like in practice' (Wetherell and Edley 1999: 337). Finally, Connell did not theorize the gender order at the global level, though this was the subject of a later work.

Contemporary significance

Connell's early writings are notable for their wider focus on men and masculinities as well as women in the field of gender studies. The work has been enormously influential in shaping gender studies and especially in our understanding of how particular gender regimes are stabilized and, potentially, destabilized. As Connell's ideas show that the gender order is never fixed or static, they have influenced both sociologists and LGBTQ+ activists.

Change in the gender order: crisis tendencies

Although Connell's account sees a clearly organized gender hierarchy, gender relations are the outcome of an ongoing process and are therefore open to challenge and change. If sex and gender *are* socially constructed, then it must be possible for people to change their gender orientation. This does not necessarily mean that people can switch with ease, but gender identities are constantly being adjusted. Women who once subscribed to 'emphasized femininity' might develop a feminist consciousness which leads to a change in identity and behaviour. This possibility of change means that patterns of gender relations are open to disruption and subject to the power of human agency.

Connell suggests there are powerful *tendencies* towards a gender crisis. First, institutions that have traditionally supported men's power – the family and the state – are gradually being undermined. The legitimacy of men's domination over women is being weakened through legislation on divorce, domestic violence and rape and economic questions such as taxation and pensions. Second, hegemonic heterosexuality is less dominant than it once was, and. finally, there are new foundations for social interests that contradict the existing gender order. Married women's rights, LGBTQ+ movements and the growth of 'anti-sexist' attitudes all pose threats to the gender order.

Of course, such threats do not have to be negative for men. More men today are becoming fully involved in child-rearing, and a minority of heterosexual men have enthusiastically embraced the relatively new social role of 'househusband'. Similarly, the idea of the 'new man', who self-consciously rejects older forms of behaviour associated with hegemonic masculinity in favour of a more caring and emotionally open

disposition, brings with it the possibility of new types of relationship. The crisis tendencies already in evidence within the existing order could be exploited in order to bring about the eradication of gender inequality (Connell 1987, 2005).

See chapter 15, 'Families and Intimate Relationships', for a more detailed discussion of changes to gender roles within family life.

Masculinities

Feminist sociologists from the 1970s onwards produced many empirical studies of inequalities between men and women which laid bare the real extent of women's unequal position in society. But little effort was expended trying to understand masculinity – the experience of being a man – or the formation of male identities. Since the late 1980s this has altered significantly. Quite fundamental changes for women in relation to paid employment and the public realm of society, along with the diversification of families, have raised new questions. What does it mean to be a man in the twenty-first century? How are traditional expectations of men being transformed? Are traditional norms of masculinity losing their grip on younger generations?

These young Wodaabe men from the Gerewol in Niger are participating in a formal dance. Their make-up, decorative dress and accessories, combined with facial expressions, make them attractive to young Wodaabe women.

Sociologists have become more interested in the positions and experiences of men within the larger 'gender order'. This shift in the sociology of gender and sexuality has led to studies of men and masculinity within the overarching context of gender relations – the societally patterned interactions between men and women. Sociologists have tried to understand how male identities are constructed and what impact socially prescribed roles have on men's behaviour.

Connell (2011) also examined the effects of globalization on the gender order. She maintains that gender itself has become globalized, with interactions between previously distinct, local gender orders as well as the creation of new arenas of gender relations. Connell argues that there are several new global arenas of gender relations: transnational and multinational corporations with a masculine management culture; international non-governmental organizations, which are also gendered and run mainly by men; the international media, which disseminate particular understandings of gender; and, lastly, global markets in capital, commodities, services and labour, which tend to be strongly gender-structured and can increasingly reach into local economies. Hence, it is now possible to talk of a 'world gender order' which provides the context for future discussions of gender and sexuality.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

7.2 Masculinity and sexuality in schools

In *The Making of Men* (1994), Mac an Ghaill presented the findings from a piece of ethnographic research which explored the 'gender regime' – the way gender relations play out – at an English state secondary school. Drawing on Connell's work, Mac an Ghaill was interested in how schools actively create a range of masculinities and femininities among students. Although he was particularly curious about the formation of heterosexual masculinities, he also investigated the experiences of a group of gay male students. His findings revealed that the school itself is an institution characterized by gendered and heterosexual patterns.

The prevailing 'regime' encourages the construction of gender relations among students which coincide with the larger gender order – that is, a hierarchy of dominant and subordinate masculinities and femininities could be detected within the confines of the school. Social influences and practices as diverse as disciplinary procedures, subject allocation, teacher–student and student–teacher interactions, and surveillance all contribute to the formation of heterosexual masculinities.

Mac an Ghaill notes four emergent types of masculinity in the school setting. The *macho lads* are a group of white working-class boys who are defiant of school authority and disdainful of the learning process and student achievers. Mac an Ghaill concludes that they are undergoing a 'crisis of masculinity', as the manual and unskilled/semi-skilled jobs which they once saw as defining their future identities are no longer available. This leaves the lads in a psychological and practical dilemma about their futures which is difficult for them to comprehend or resolve.

The second group consists of the *academic achievers*, who see themselves as future professionals. These boys are stereotyped by the 'macho lads' (and teachers) as effeminate, 'dickhead achievers'.

The most common route taken by the achievers in handling the vicious stereotyping, according to Mac an Ghaill, is to retain confidence that their hard work and academic credentials will grant them a secure future. This forms the basis of their masculine identities.

The third group, the *new enterprisers*, are boys who gravitate towards subjects in the new vocational curriculum, such as computer science and business studies. Mac an Ghaill sees them as children of the new 'enterprise culture' that was cultivated during the Thatcher years. For these boys, success in A-level exams is relatively useless for their emphasis on the market and their instrumental planning for the future.

The *real Englishmen* make up the final group. They are the most troublesome of the middle-class groups, as they maintain an ambivalent attitude towards academic learning but see themselves as 'arbiters of culture', superior to anything their teachers can offer. Because they are oriented towards entry into a career, masculinity for this group involves the appearance of effortless academic achievement.

In his study of gay male students, Mac an Ghaill found that a distinctly heterosexual set of norms and values – based on traditional relationships and nuclear families – is taken for granted in all classroom discussions that touch on gender or sexuality. This leads to difficult 'confusions and contradictions' in the construction of gender and sexual identities for young gay men, who can feel simultaneously ignored and categorized by others. This study was carried out in the mid-1990s, and LGBTQ+ civil rights have been strengthened significantly since then. Yet surveys still show that jokes and negative comments about gay people are routine and commonplace in school settings (EUFRA 2014).

THINKING CRITICALLY

If same-sex relationships have become more widely accepted in society, why is heteronormativity still so strong in schools? How might teachers and management change the prevailing gender order of the school?

LGBTQ+ civil rights

A good deal of recent research has explored the shifting social and legal position of same-sex relations in the world's societies, though there is also a growing recognition of the wider diversity of sexual minorities. This section focuses on the changing position of LGBTQ+ people alongside changing attitudes towards same-sex relations since the late 1960s.

Gay rights and homophobia

In an early study, Plummer (1975) distinguished four types of homosexuality within modern Western culture. *Casual homosexuality* is a passing encounter that does not substantially structure a person's overall sexual life. Schoolboy crushes and mutual masturbation are examples. *Situated activities* refer to circumstances in which same-sex acts are regularly carried out but do not become an individual's overriding preference. In settings such as prisons or military camps, where men live without women, same-sex behaviour of this kind is common, regarded as a substitute for heterosexual behaviour rather than as preferable to it. *Personalized homosexuality* refers to individuals who have a preference for same-sex activities but are isolated from groups in which this is easily accepted. Same-sex relations here are secretive activities, hidden away from friends and colleagues. *Homosexuality as a way of life* refers to individuals who have 'come out' and made associations with others of similar sexual tastes a key part of their lives. Usually this involves belonging to subcultures in which same-sex activities are integrated into a distinct lifestyle. Such communities often provide the possibility of collective political action to advance the rights and interests of lesbians and gay men.

The proportion of the population (both male and female) who have had same-sex experiences or experienced strong inclinations towards the same sex is larger than those who follow an openly gay lifestyle. Attitudes of intolerance towards lesbians and gay men have been so pronounced in the past that it is only during recent years that some of

the myths surrounding the subject have been dispelled. Homophobia, a term coined in the late 1960s, refers to an aversion to or hatred of homosexuals and their lifestyles, along with behaviour based on these. Homophobia is a form of prejudice that is reflected not only in overt acts of hostility and violence but also in verbal abuse. In the UK, for example, terms such as 'fag' or 'queer' are used as derogatory terms against homosexuals, while 'hate crimes', including violent assaults, still occur. For instance, in 2019, a lesbian couple travelling on a London bus were subjected to homophobic harassment and assaulted by a group of young men who pelted them with coins (BBC News 2019d).

In 2008, a survey of teachers in the UK reported that the word 'gay' was the most widely heard term of abuse among schoolchildren of all ages, meaning 'lame' or 'rubbish' (BBC 2008). Over recent decades, governments have introduced legislation to punish and combat hate crimes – attacks on members of such groups as gay men, lesbians, disabled people, homeless people and religious communities, purely on the basis of their group membership (Gerstenfeld 2010). A body of empirical research has shown that 'lesbians and gay men experience a wide spectrum of heterosexist violence, from physical assault to harassment and verbal abuse on a day-to-day basis' (Moran et al. 2004: 1). While such levels of violence were previously largely hidden from view, the concept of hate crime has helped to draw attention to continuing homophobic attitudes and abuse – a necessary first step to dealing with it.

A 2014 survey for the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights found that 47 per cent of LGBT people had felt personally harassed or discriminated against in the previous year, more than 80 per cent had heard negative comments or seen negative conduct towards peers perceived to be LGBT, and 67 per cent said they had disguised or hidden the fact they were LGBT in school before the age of eighteen. Some 80 per cent also reported that casual jokes about LGBT people are widespread in everyday life (EUFRA 2014: 11–12). Although much progress has been made towards equal civil rights for lesbians and gay men, this survey shows that the homophobic attitudes that remain embedded within the cultures of EU societies persist into the twenty-first century.

See also the issues raised in the section 'Sexual orientation hate crimes' in [chapter 22](), 'Crime and Deviance'.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Conduct a small survey of your friends, relatives and peer group aimed at finding out how often they hear jokes and casual negative comments about LGBTQ+ people. What could you do to minimize the possibility that people will not be truthful about others and themselves?

Today there is a growing global movement for the rights of sexual minorities. The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA), founded in 1978, has more than 1,600 member organizations across 159 countries. It holds international conferences, supports lesbian and gay social movements around the world, and lobbies international organizations. For example, it convinced the Council of Europe to require all its member nations to repeal laws banning homosexuality. In general, active lesbian and gay social movements tend to thrive in countries that emphasize individual rights and liberal state policies (Frank and McEneaney 1999).

Some kinds of gay male behaviour have been seen as attempts to alter the conventional connection of masculinity with power – one reason, perhaps, why some in the heterosexual community find them threatening. Many gay men reject the image of 'effeminacy' popularly associated with them and deviate from this in two ways. One is through cultivating outrageous effeminacy – a 'camp' masculinity that parodies the stereotype and is often seen at Gay Pride events around the world. The other is by developing a 'macho' image. This also is not conventionally masculine; men dressed as motorcyclists or cowboys are again parodying masculinity, by exaggerating it, as in the 1970s

band the Village People and their globally recognized anthem 'YMCA' (Bertelson 1986).

Sociological research into the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic suggests that it challenged some of the main ideological foundations of heterosexual masculinity. Sexuality and sexual behaviour became topics for public discussion, from safe-sex campaigns backed by government funds to media coverage. Most of all, the media-driven moral panic linking HIV infection to 'gay lifestyles' – however misguided and factually incorrect – increased the visibility of gay men and lesbians. Thus the epidemic called into question the universality of heterosexuality, demonstrating that alternatives exist to the traditional nuclear family (Redman 1996). In many ways, same-sex relations have become an accepted part of everyday society, with many countries passing legislation to protect the civil rights of LGBTQ+ people.

HIV/AIDS and responses to the outbreak are discussed in more detail in chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability'.
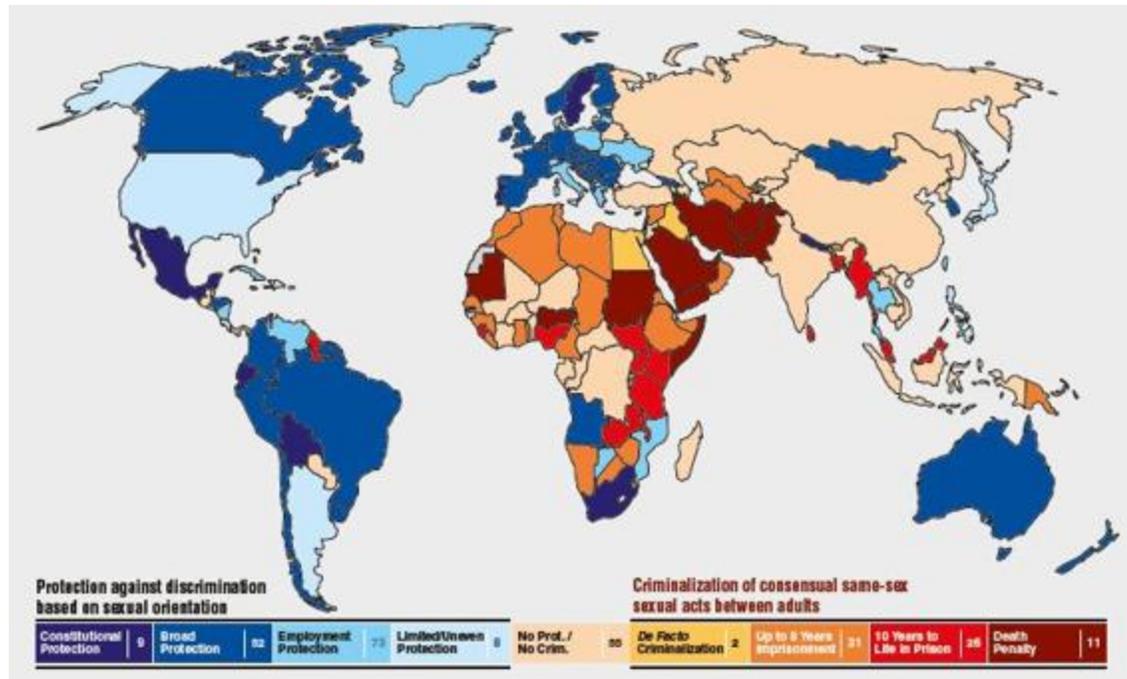
Figure 7.2 Legal status of lesbian, gay and bisexual people across the world

Source: Adapted from ILGA (2019).

When South Africa adopted its new constitution in 1996, it became one of very few countries at that time constitutionally to guarantee the rights of homosexual people. There are still enormous differences in the legal protections afforded to LGBT people. In some countries same-sex sexual acts carry prison terms, and in others the death penalty remains in force (see figure 7.2). In Africa, male same-sex relations have been legalized in only a small number of countries, while lesbian relations are seldom mentioned in the law at all. In Asia and the Middle East, the situation is similar: gay sex is banned in the vast majority of countries, including all of those that are predominantly Islamic. The EU, most of South America, North America, Australia and New Zealand have some of the most liberal laws in the world. Across the EU, same-sex relationships have been legalized in almost all countries, many of which legally recognize same-sex partnerships or marriage. Such rights are important, as both civil partnerships and marriage grant rights to social security and pension benefits, tenancy rights, possible parental responsibility for a partner's children, full recognition for life

assurance, responsibility to provide reasonable maintenance for partners and children, and visiting rights in hospitals.

See [Chapter 15](#), 'Families and Intimate Relationships', for a discussion of same-sex civil partnerships and marriage.

Nevertheless, public attitudes towards equal marriage rights differ widely within societies as well as across the world. Even within one geographical region such as Europe there exists a wide divergence of national opinion. In a survey of public opinion taken in 2017, the Pew Research Center reported a clear divergence of attitudes towards LGBT rights between Western and Eastern Europe. In the fifteen Western European countries, a majority of adults were in favour of same-sex marriage, including 60 per cent in Italy, 75 per cent in Switzerland, 86 per cent in the Netherlands and Denmark, and 88 per cent in Sweden. Yet in Central and Eastern Europe, with the exception of the Czech Republic (with 65 per cent in favour), the situation is largely reversed. In Poland, just 32 per cent were in favour of same-sex marriage, while other figures were 27 per cent in in Hungary, a mere 9 per cent in Ukraine and only 5 per cent in Russia (Lipka and Masci 2019).

As public opinion on sexuality is quite diverse, with strong disagreements rooted in religious and political beliefs, legislative change and social policy do not always *follow* public opinion but can also contribute to *changing* it. For many LGBTQ+ people, the introduction of civil partnerships did not represent progress but instead reinforced existing unequal civil rights. Real progress requires legal marriage to be available for all on the same basis, with full equality of status, rights and obligations. By October 2019, thirty countries and territories had introduced marriage rights for same-sex couples, with most of these in Europe and the Americas (Pew Research Center 2019).

Before the late 1960s, most gay men and lesbians hid their sexual orientation for fear that 'coming out' would cost them their jobs, families and friends and leave them open to discrimination and hate crime. Since the 1960s, things began to change as activists challenged the heteronormativity of societies (Seidman 1997). Manchester, New York, San Francisco, Sydney and many other large metropolitan areas around the world have thriving gay and lesbian communities, and, as the surveys above show, acceptance of same-sex relationships in some parts of the world has grown and the lives of many lesbian and gay people have, to a large extent, been normalized.

Transgender rights and feminism

Some of the most heated discussions and academic debates around gender and sexuality in recent years have taken place around transgender identity, and particularly trans women. We cannot do justice to the origins, development and subtleties of this debate in this brief section, but we can provide an outline of one centrally divisive dispute, which pits some feminists against trans activists.

For many trans activists and academics, the campaign for transgender rights and acceptance is the latest in a long line of civil rights movements that weaves through black civil rights, feminism, and lesbian and gay activism. Indeed, the movement for transgender rights developed as a part of the wider LGBT coalition (Taylor et al. 2018: 26). In this sense it is a progressive social movement rooted in human rights discourse, promoting the right of individuals to express their personal identity and to 'be themselves'. In fact, many trans men and trans women who transitioned in adulthood say that 'coming out' is, as the phrase suggests, akin to the similar process experienced by lesbians and gay men.

In sociology, debates on transgender identities are also part of the longstanding 'queering' of all notions that sex, gender and (hetero)sexuality are 'natural' or in some way biologically rooted and, therefore, fixed. Social constructionists of varying stripes continue to argue that biology is not destiny and that all forms of social and personal identity are shaped within the social process as a whole. So far, so consensual.

However, for some feminist activists and academics, the inclusion of trans women within the broad category of 'women' is problematic or just unacceptable. This is especially true in societies that accept gender self-identification, where people can change their gender identity to that of woman while remaining physiologically male. In short, for some feminists, trans women are not and never can be 'authentic' women: 'The men who claim womanhood do not have any experience of being women, and thus should not have the right to speak as "women"' (Jeffreys 2014: 7). Another way of putting this is to say that they may be socially accepted as 'women', but they cannot *become* 'female'. This argument makes the female body itself central to what it means to be a woman.

For example, feminists have campaigned for women's reproductive rights over their own bodies and for equality of health and care provision, highlighting women's experiences of everyday sexism, sexual harassment and domestic violence at the hands of men. Hines (2019) argues that, in these areas (and others), the female body is both a political matter and a site of feminist politics. Yet, in the current situation, the recourse to the female body in order to exclude trans women represents an essentialist step backwards into the old nature/culture dualism. The latter positions women as closer to nature

and thus to biology, which 'explains' their more 'emotional temperament' when compared to men. Feminists spent much time arguing against such an unscientific, stereotypical notion. However, Stulberg (2018: 160) maintains that, despite some opposition, in the USA at least, trans inclusion has become more common within the mainstream of the LGBTQ+ civil rights movement.

Global society 7.2 Gender and sexuality in the ninth edition

The feminist intervention in sociology has shown a persistent male bias in social scientific research and theorizing and brought about many changes in the discipline. We cannot cover the entirety of genderrelated issues in this chapter, but readers can use the guide below to find other relevant sections in the book.

Chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?' – Introduction to feminist theorizing in sociology

Chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives' – Extended discussion of feminist critiques of 'malestream sociology'; the significance of gender inequality in social science

Chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class' – Extended discussion of gender inequality and stratification; gender and social mobility

Chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability' – The medicalization of pregnancy and childbirth; global gender inequalities in health; the impact of HIV on sexual behaviour

Chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare' – Gender inequality and poverty; pension inequalities

Chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life' – Gender in verbal and non-verbal communication; gender identities and the body; gender inequality in social interactions

Chapter 14, 'The Life Course' – Extended discussion of gendered socialization, stereotyping and the feminization of later life

Chapter 15, 'Families and Intimate Relationships' – Extended discussion of gender inequalities; work, housework and the domestic division of labour; intimate violence and the 'dark side' of family life; feminist approaches to family studies

Chapter 16, 'Education' – Extended discussion of gender inequality and sexism in schools; the reproduction of gender divisions

The tenor of the disagreements between some feminists and trans activists has been acrimonious. In the UK context, some feminist activists reject the idea and practice of trans women being allowed into 'women's spaces' – such as public toilets and swimming pool changing rooms – as an extension of patriarchal domination and a form of male violence against women. Trans activists often refer to feminists opposed to accepting trans women as women as TERFs – 'trans-exclusionary radical feminists' – and there has been 'no-platforming' of outspoken feminist critics, such as Germaine Greer, on university campuses on the grounds that their strident views may incite hatred towards trans people.

We should note that contemporary discussions around gender fluidity, transgender identities and diverse sexualities – although not wholly new – are relatively recently developed and have yet to be worked through fully in empirical research studies and theoretical debates. As we saw in the chapter introduction, in the last decade or so there has been a rapid increase in the number of people seeking help and advice on gender identification, which indicates that real-world social change is running ahead of empirical studies and academic understanding that might help to take some of the heat out of an apparently unbridgeable dispute.

Globalization, human trafficking and sex work

In this chapter, most of our discussion has focused on issues within Western industrialized societies. But, in a global age, social movements are forging international networks and a global orientation in order to remain effective and combat continuing exploitation. In parts of the developing world, feminism means working to alleviate absolute poverty and to change traditional male attitudes, which favour large families and oppose contraception, while in the developed countries it means continuing campaigns for equality in employment, adequate childcare provision, and the ending of male harassment and violence towards women. One area which connects the concerns of women's movements in the global South and the North is the exploitation of women, particularly young women, in the global sex industry.

Global human trafficking

'Sex tourism' exists in several areas of the world, including Thailand and the Philippines. Sex tourism in the Far East has its origins in the provision of prostitutes for American troops during the Korean and Vietnam wars. 'Rest and recreation' centres were built in Thailand, the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea and Taiwan. Some still remain, particularly in the Philippines, catering to regular shipments of tourists as well as to the military stationed in the region.

Today, package tours oriented towards prostitution draw men to these areas from Europe, the United States and Japan, though many are in search of sex with minors as well as with adults. However, such tours are illegal in more than thirty countries, among them the UK, Australia, Canada, Japan and the USA, under laws dealing with the 'extraterritorial accountability' of their citizens. Enforcement is patchy, though, and by 2004 Japan had made no prosecutions under its legislation, whereas the USA had made at least twenty prosecutions for sex tourism (Svensson 2006).

Cheaper global travel and the large differential in exchange rates between Asian and international currencies have made sex tourism more affordable and attractive to foreigners. Some desperate families force their own children into prostitution; other young people are unwittingly lured into the sex trade by responding innocently to advertisements for 'entertainers' or 'dancers'. Migration patterns from rural to urban areas are an important factor in the growth of the sex industry, as many women eager to leave their traditional and constraining hometowns grasp at any opportunity to do so (Lim 1998). One study of trafficking in South-Eastern Europe found that, in 2003–4, the majority of victims of trafficking were sexually exploited, though they were also used for labour, begging, delinquency and adoption (Surtees 2005: 12).

Global society 7.3 The global trade in female sex workers

International [human trafficking](), mostly of women and girls, has become a much more significant issue in recent years. For example, the trafficking of women into Western Europe to become prostitutes and sex workers is expanding rapidly. Although it not known exactly how many people become victims of human trafficking, the UN Office on Drugs and Crime estimates that there were some 140,000 trafficking victims in Europe in 2010 (UNODC 2010: 4). As EU borders have expanded with the entry of new countries such as Bulgaria and Romania, more transit routes have become available for entry into wealthy Western European states, or the new border countries have become final destinations themselves for a growing sex industry.

Victims of human trafficking may also experience 'retrafficking' – being trafficked again (many within two years) after moving out of their original situation (Surtees 2005). Estimates of retrafficking vary widely and tend to be derived from relatively small-scale studies. Stephen-Smith (2008) suggested a rate of 21 per cent for women trafficked for sexual exploitation into the UK, while in India the comparable figure was 25.8 per cent in 2003 (Sen and Nair 2004). However, other studies have found retrafficking rates as low as 3 per cent in some regions of South-Eastern Europe but as high as 45 per in the case of trafficked people in Albania for forced labour (Surtees 2005).

Retrafficking can occur while victims are exiting or after they have escaped from a trafficked situation. This can mean a second episode of international trafficking across borders or internal trafficking within the country of origin on their return. Jobe's (2010: 11–12) analysis of seventy-nine cases of trafficked women, from the International Organization for Migration's (IOM) Human Trafficking Database, found that women, young adults and children were most vulnerable to retrafficking. This study also found that retrafficking

was more likely when victims return home and face problems integrating into society, which is more probable:

- where trafficked people returned home and were members of minority ethnic groups, subject to discrimination

- where significant gender inequality exists in the country of origin

- where victims are from countries with ongoing or recent conflicts, or

- are refugees or displaced persons, or

- are between fifteen and twenty-five years old and lack family support, or

- have alcohol or drug dependency problems, or

- have psychological or psychosocial problems as a result of their trafficking experiences.

Although human trafficking affects both men and women, the available evidence from research studies shows a clear gendered pattern, with most of its victims being young women and girls. In this way, it seems that trafficking is a particularly severe and harmful dimension of global gender inequality today.

Governments have made some moves to legislate against human trafficking. In the UK, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 made trafficking for prostitution a criminal offence for the first time and was extended to trafficking for domestic servitude and forced labour in 2004. As globalization enables the more rapid movement of people across national boundaries, new patterns of movement are emerging. Relatively rich men make short trips into developing countries to buy sex from relatively poor people, while relatively powerless Eastern European women are forced into 'sex work' in Western Europe by powerful organized gangs of, mostly male, people traffickers.

However, some scholars are not convinced that the dominant discourse on sex trafficking should be taken at face value, arguing that it may

constitute a 'moral panic' that emerged from the concerns of evangelical Christian organizations and feminists. This perhaps unlikely combination has led to exaggerated, misleading statistics on the extent of sex trafficking and a slide into arguments against the legalization of prostitution as such (Davies 2009). Going further, Bernstein (2018) argues that her own research with sex workers in the Global South found many who simply did not view themselves as 'victims' at all. Hence, the trafficking discourse is associated primarily with state agencies and NGOs from the Global North that work to 'save' those they consider to be 'sex slaves' in developing countries but rarely take note of the experiences of sex workers themselves, or adopt their self-definitions. Critiques such as these suggest that more work is needed to understand the varied forms of sex work and the experiences of sex workers.

Sex work

The term 'prostitution' came into common usage in the late eighteenth century and may be defined as the performance of sexual acts for monetary gain. And though prostitution involves men, women and trans people, our focus here is on women, who make up the majority of this population. In 2016, it was estimated that there were between 60,000 and 80,000 sex workers in England and Wales, and the majority of these were women (House of Commons 2016: 2).

A key aspect of modern prostitution is that women and their clients are generally unknown to one another. Although men may become 'regular customers', the relationship is not initially established on the basis of personal acquaintance. Prostitution is directly connected to the break-up of small-scale communities, the development of large impersonal urban areas, and the commercialization of social relations. In newly developed urban areas, anonymous social connections were more easily established.

A United Nations resolution passed in 1951 condemned those who organize prostitution or profit from the activities of prostitutes, but it did not ban prostitution as such. Legislation on prostitution varies widely. In some countries, prostitution itself is illegal, while in other

countries only certain types, such as street soliciting or child prostitution, are banned. Some national or local governments license officially recognized brothels or sex parlours – such as the 'Eros centres' in Germany or sex houses in Amsterdam. In October 1999 the Dutch Parliament turned prostitution into an official profession for the estimated 30,000 women who work in the sex industry. All venues where sex is sold can now be regulated, licensed and inspected by local authorities. However, only very few countries license male prostitutes.

Legislation against prostitution rarely punishes clients. In many countries, those who purchase sexual services are not arrested or prosecuted, and in court procedures their identities may be kept hidden. However, in Sweden (since 1999), Norway and Iceland (since 2009), legislation has been enacted which criminalizes the *buying* of sexual services, pimping, procuring, and operating a brothel but does not criminalize the *selling* of sexual services. This is intended to shift the burden of stigma away from female prostitutes and onto the men who buy their services, which, it is hoped, will reduce the demand for prostitution in the long term.

There are far fewer studies of buyers than sellers of sexual services (see Sanders 2008), and it is rare for anyone to suggest – as is often stated or implied about prostitutes – that clients are psychologically disturbed. The imbalance in research expresses an uncritical acceptance of orthodox stereotypes of sexuality, according to which it is 'normal' for men actively to seek a variety of sexual outlets, while those who cater for those 'needs' are condemned.

Today, prostitution is more widely seen by sociologists as one form of sex work. Sex work can be defined as the provision of sexual services in a financial exchange between consenting adults, though, of course, children (and adults) have historically been – and still are – forced into exploitative sex work. Sex workers, like prostitutes, are mostly female, and sex work includes at least all of the following: actors in pornographic films, nude modelling, striptease and lap dancers, live sex show workers, providers of erotic massage, phone sex workers, and home-based 'webcam sex' via the internet, if this involves a financial exchange (Weitzer 2000). Testimony presented by the Sex Work Research Hub to the UK's Home Affairs Committee suggests that some

80 per cent of indoor sex workers were women, 17 per cent men and just over 2 per cent transgender (House of Commons 2016: 9).

Some sex workers have become politically active, as here in Kenya in 2012, campaigning for better conditions. Should feminists support such campaigns and the notion that prostitution and sex work are 'professions' like any other?

The original 1970s concept of the sex worker aimed to destigmatize the working practices of prostitutes and other women in the sex industry. Provided that sexual services were exchanged between freely consenting adults, it was argued that such work should be treated like any other type of work and that prostitution, in particular, should be decriminalized. Prostitutes around the world today come mainly from poorer social backgrounds, as they did in the past, but they have now been joined by considerable numbers of middle-class women operating across the range of sex work described above, and many see what they do as providing useful and respectable sexual services. As 'Rona', a sex worker with ten years' experience, insists:

Yes, it is a profession – I believe a perfectly respectable profession, and should be viewed as such in the same way as a teacher, accountant or anyone else…. Why should the fact that I have chosen to work as a prostitute be considered any different from that of being a nurse, which I once was? There should be no social stigma attached. I work in clean comfortable surroundings, have regular medical check-ups and pay taxes like anyone else. ('Rona' 2000)

The idea of a trade union for sex workers may appear strange, but, in the context of ensuring health and safety at work, legal support in disputes over pay and conditions, and access to training or retraining for those who wish to leave the industry, these issues lie at the centre of mainstream trade union activity. Sex workers point out that union collectivization may help to root out exploitation and abuse. For example, formed in 2000 and based in London, the International Union of Sex Workers (IUSW) sees unionization as the first step towards the professionalization of sex work. In 2002 it became affiliated to the GMB, a large general trade union in the UK. The IUSW campaigns for the decriminalization of sex work involving consenting adults and the right of workers to form professional associations or unions.

Nevertheless, the concept of sex work remains controversial. Many feminists actively campaign against the sex industry, seeing it as degrading to women, strongly linked to sexual abuse and drug addiction, and ultimately rooted in women's subordination to men. Sex work has been reappraised by other feminists, who argue that many, though by no means all, women sex workers earn a good living, enjoy what they do and do not fit the stereotype of the poor, sexually abused drug addict, forced into prostitution by their circumstances (2011b 2000). Individuals in this group see themselves as independent women who have taken control of their lives, which makes them little different from successful women in other employment sectors (Chapkis 1997).

In a study of lap dancers in England, Sanders and Hardy (2011) found that 87 per cent were educated to at least further education level, about one-quarter had a university degree and a third were students. For 60 per cent, dancing was their sole form of income, though almost 40 per cent had other forms of work. Sanders and Hardy report that job

satisfaction was 'strikingly high', with a large majority (76.4 per cent) of the women saying they felt 'happy' or 'very happy' with their work. More than 70 per cent also reported positive aspects of the job as the ability to choose the hours of work, earning more money than in other jobs, getting paid immediately, allowing them to become independent and keep fit, and with the job combining 'fun' and 'work'. One dancer summed up the benefits as 'Better money. No commitment. Leave when you want to leave. Drink what you want.'

However, significant proportions of dancers also reported negative aspects, such as uncertainty of income, a lack of career prospects, having to keep the job a secret, rude and abusive customers, losing respect for men, and feeling bad about themselves. Some also found the job emotionally difficult to handle and reported that some clubs were dangerous or exploitative. Clearly, the experience of lap dancers is not uniform or wholly positive, but Sanders and Hardy's empirical study suggests that, for most, the positive aspects outweighed the negatives.

Yet lap dancing, unlike prostitution, does not usually involve sexual contact with customers and may therefore not be representative of the experience of a majority of sex workers. Indeed, given the diversity of sex work, it would be unwise to try to generalize about its apparently exploitative or empowering character. Rather, it will be necessary for researchers to investigate and compare the different types of sex work if we are to understand better the attractions and risks of sex work in the twenty-first century.

> ## THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> If some groups of female sex workers express a general satisfaction with sex work and form their own organizations, explain why it is still legitimate for feminists to campaign against it.

Gender and sexuality: all change again?

Getting to grips with the language and terms of debate on sex, gender and sexuality is undoubtedly more complex than it was before the mid-1990s. Theoretical positions and arguments seem to be in constant flux, as is the appropriate terminology within the field of gender studies, which regularly changes with the intervention of political movements. For new students to sociology, this can feel offputting. But we must remember that the reason for this is mainly the pace of social change, which has forced sociologists to amend their terminology and to devise new concepts and theories to understand the shifting situation on the ground.

For instance, the separation of sex and gender which characterized second-wave feminism of the 1970s appeared to offer a radical solution to the identification of men and women purely on the basis of their assigned sex at birth. Recognizing that social norms of femininity and masculinity changed over time and differed across societies allowed sociologists to trace their development and demonstrated that gendered behaviour was not the product of biology. For a while the sex/gender distinction provided a settled paradigm for researchers and was a valuable move, but today this previously radical approach is itself viewed as falling into essentialism, uncritically accepting that sex is biologically given while only gender is subject to change. The transgender critique of some forms of 'exclusionary feminism', discussed above, is just one illustration of the recasting of debates in gender politics today.

And yet our final example of sex work and human trafficking shows that, in the midst of what appears to be relentless flux and change, some things are remarkably persistent. Patriarchal male dominance and the exploitation of children and young women continue apace in the twenty-first century, but now on a truly global scale. Progress towards gender and sexual equality has clearly been made in much of the Global North, but as yet this has generally not been mirrored in the Global South. Sociology has to adapt to a fast-changing social reality, but the discipline's continuing focus on power relations, social inequality

and theory development will ensure that sociology retains its academic relevance.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. Explain the conventional sociological distinction between sex and gender.

2. 'Both sex and gender are socially constructed and can be shaped and altered in various ways.' Does human biology play any role in the shaping of people's gender identities? Provide some examples that illustrate your answer.

3. With examples, explain what is meant by 'gender socialization'. What problems are there with conventional accounts of gender socialization?

4. Outline Connell's theory of the gender order. How is the gender order changing in the global age?

5. 'Same-sex relationships are now widely accepted in society.' What evidence is there from the chapter to support or refute this statement? How would you characterize the global picture?

6. Explain the difference between transgender and cisgender. On what grounds have some feminists criticized the ideas of transgender activists?

7. All mainstream feminist approaches reject the idea that gender inequality is in some ways 'natural'. If they are right, how can we explain the persistence of gender inequalities in the twenty-first century?

8. Why are postmodern feminism, poststructural feminism and queer theory seen as radically different from earlier theories of gender and gender inequality?

9. What are the main differences between second- and third-wave feminism? Does the third wave represent 'post-feminism' or a reinvigoration of feminist activism?

10. What is 'sex work'? Outline the varied positions within feminism as to whether sex work is simply another type of work or an

exploitation of women.

🔍 <u>Research in practice</u>

The advent of internet dating sites and apps has had a major impact on how people meet each other for intimate contact and relationships. At a simple level, online dating makes meetings easier and more immediate and offers a greater number of accessible contacts than previous forms. Popular apps such as Grindr and Tinder are much more likely to be used by younger people (under thirty-five), suggesting a generational divide and perhaps a shift in what 'dating' means and what people expect from it today.

Some sociological critics of image-based dating apps argue that they contribute to a consumerist version of intimacy in which people are selected, ordered and used in the manner of a fast-food takeaway. Does this inevitably lead to a reliance on stereotypical ideas, or do dating apps actually help to empower women and thus promote equality? Read the article below, which explores these issues, and then address the questions.

> Lee, J. (2019) 'Mediated Superficiality and Misogyny through Cool on Tinder', *Social Media and Society*, 5(3): 1–11.
>
> 1. Focusing on the research methods, describe how the researchers approached the task of gathering and validating their data. How would you characterize this study?
>
> 2. What do the authors mean by 'the Tinder card game' and the 'hookup culture'?
>
> 3. On Tinder, 'the principle of the *psychological self* in modern intimacy is replaced with the economy of visibility'. What does this change entail?
>
> 4. According to the paper, what is a 'cool girl'? Do the norms associated with being a cool girl help to empower young women or are they a new form of misogyny?
>
> 5. Devise a follow-up study aimed at exploring the existence or otherwise of racist stereotyping on dating apps. How could the

data be collected and what research methods would be most effective?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Although the disagreement between some radical feminists and transgender activists about 'who owns gender' has some sociological content, the dispute seems primarily political. The intemperate language used on both sides does not allow for a sober, sociological discussion of the main issues involved underneath the rhetoric and positioning. One attempt to add a sociological intervention into this debate is Jackson and Scott's online piece: Jackson, S., and Scott, S. (2017) 'Trans and the Contradictions of Gender', https://discoversociety.org/2017/06/06/focus-trans-and-the-contradictions-of-gender/.

Carefully read through this argument and note how the authors deal with:

- radical feminist criticisms of transgender ideas
- the transgender critique of 'TERF' – trans-exclusionary radical feminism
- the history of the concepts of sex and gender
- sociological theories of gender and gender inequality.

Write a 1,000-word essay with the title: 'If we take gender seriously, then no one is a "real" woman'. Explain why this position makes sense sociologically, and consider what objections could be made to it from the standpoint of radical feminism and transgender politics.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Watch the documentary film *Miss Representation* (2011), directed by Jennifer Siebel Newsom (official trailer on YouTube here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw_QEuAvn6I). This movie looks at gender inequality in the US media and society, asking questions about the impact of persistent one-dimensional images and representations of women and the under-representation of women within the media industry.

Write a 1,000-word review of the film, linking its main evidence to sociological theories. Make sure the conclusion comes to an overall evaluation of the central thesis, that the mass media make a significant contribution to reproducing gender inequality. Does the evidence support this assessment or is there more diversity today than there was a decade earlier?

Further reading

A reliable introduction to the study of gender and sexuality in sociology is Momin Rahman and Stevi Jackson's (2010) *Gender and Sexuality: Sociological Approaches* (Cambridge: Polity). Victoria Robinson and Diane Richardson's (2015) *Introducing Gender and Women's Studies* (4th edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) offers a comprehensive guide to issues of gender alongside the full range of feminist theorizing.

A lively introduction to recent work on gender fluidity is Sally Hines's (2018) *Is Gender Fluid? A Primer for the 21st Century* (London: Thames & Hudson). *Researching Sex and Sexualities* (2018), edited by Charlotte Morris et al. (London: Zed Books), is a very useful guide to creative methods in this field, worth consulting for research project ideas.

Judith Lorber's (2012) *Gender Inequality: Feminist Theories and Politics* (5th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press) provides an excellent chronological account of the development of feminist theories of gender inequality. Raewyn Connell (2020) offers a rigorous yet accessible overview of the social scientific study of gender in *Gender: In World Perspective* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity).

Finally, anyone looking for reference works could consult Jane Pilcher and Imelda Whelehan's (2016) *Key Concepts in Gender Studies* (2nd edn, London: Sage) and *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Feminism* (2019), edited by Tasha Oren and Andrea L. Press (Abingdon: Routledge), which contains many interesting papers.

For a collection of original readings on social inequalities, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

The Women's Library – lots of resources and useful links on women's history in the UK:
www.lse.ac.uk/library/collection-highlights/The-Womens-Library

Queer Resource Directory – a gateway to many resources on religion, youth, health and more:
www.qrd.org/qrd/

Eldis – gender issues in developing countries:
www.eldis.org/gender/

Voice of the Shuttle – many gender and sexuality studies resources at the University of California:
http://vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2711

ILGA – the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association:
www.ilga.org/

Feminist.com – US site with lots of resources and ideas:
www.feminist.com/

CHAPTER 8

RACE, ETHNICITY AND MIGRATION

CONTENTS

Football is a high-profile global sport that has seen a rising number of racist incidents within stadiums in the twenty-first century. Following the killing of George Floyd in the US in May 2020, players across the UK leagues took the knee at the start of football matches, and there was extensive sharing of the protest message 'Black Lives Matter'.

In the 1960s and 1970s, black footballers in the English game began to break through in larger numbers than before. With that visibility came quite routine and widespread racist abuse during games, from bananas being thrown at players to racist chanting and monkey gestures. At the time, neither football clubs nor authorities took any serious action to stamp out such behaviour. In the 1970s and 1980s, far-right racist organizations such as the National Front also used football as a site for recruiting members and supporters (Grebby 2019).

Some anti-racist supporters' groups were also formed in the 1980s, but it was not until the 1990s that a concerted attempt was made by football authorities to tackle racism against players and among supporters. Anyone who attends top-level English football today will

probably attest that overt, widespread racism and racist chanting is quite unusual rather than the norm. Yet the racist abuse of black football players from the stands has not disappeared. Indeed, many domestic European leagues have seen numerous racist incidents in recent years.

In September 2019, some fans of the Italian club Cagliari abused Inter Milan's Romelu Lukaku with monkey noises and racist abuse and, in November, Brescia striker Mario Balotelli was racially abused by Hellas Verona supporters. In December 2018, Manchester City forward Raheem Sterling was racially abused by a group of Chelsea fans during an English Premier League game in London, and one year later several black Manchester United players reported racist abuse during a derby game at their City rivals. Also in 2019, an England international match against Bulgaria in Sofia was stopped twice because of monkey chants, racist abuse and Nazi salutes from a section of the crowd. Bulgaria was fined €75,000 and ordered to play two games behind closed doors (BBC Sport 2019).

One major change in football racism has been the movement into online environments, particularly social media. Okwonga (2019) reports that recent statistics show an increasing trend towards the racist abuse of black players on social media, with large spikes in levels of abuse following key games. This suggests that racist abuse may be becoming, if not yet normalized, at least much more common in anonymous cyberspace, where perpetrators are often not match-going supporters. Carrington (cited in Okwonga 2019) argues that online racist abuse is the latest form of social sanctioning, effectively aimed at maintaining the 'racial order', an idea embedded within eighteenthand nineteenth-century theories of racial types and white supremacy – 'a founding ideology of the West'.

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, botanists, biologists and zoologists worked systematically to classify the variety of organisms and species on the planet. Some schemes, such as that of the Swedish scientist Carl Linnaeus (1707–78) – whose system of taxonomy remains in force in the natural sciences today – also included human beings. Linnaeus distinguished four basic varieties of human: white European (*Homo Europaeus*), black African (*Homo Africanus*), red

American (*Homo Americanus*) and brown (later, yellow) Asian (*Homo Asiaticus*) (Israel 2019: 431–2). Although these were rooted in geographical origin, skin colour was considered the key distinguishing aspect. But from here came the temptation, illegitimately and without evidence, to impute personal and social characteristics based primarily on skin colour to differing 'racial' groups.

The best known of such arguments is de Gobineau's (1816–82) *The Inequality of Human Races* (1853–5). De Gobineau, often labelled the 'father' of modern racism, proposed the existence of just three races: white (*Caucasian*), black (*Negroid*) and Yellow (*Mongoloid*). According to de Gobineau, the white race possessed superior intelligence, morality and willpower, inherited qualities that underpinned the spread of Western influence. The black race, by contrast, was the least capable, marked by an animal nature, a lack of morality and emotional instability. Such wild generalizations may be implausible and unscientific today, but they have clearly been influential. Race supremacy ideas were part of the ideology of the German National Socialist (Nazi) Party as well as racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan in the USA.

Philosophers also took an interest in racial characteristics and the prospects for 'civilization' across the world. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) considered the European level of civilization to be the highest human achievement, which other races could imitate but would never attain (Kowner and Skott 2015: 51–4). Kant saw four basic races: White, Negro, Hindu and Hunnic (Mongolian), with the Chinese being a 'half-race' mixture of the latter two. Derogatory terms for people of mixed race are commonplace and exist in many cultures. Until the 1970s in Britain, the term 'half-caste' was widely used and was commonly employed in British colonies around the world. In Australia the term was used to describe children born to white colonists and indigenous Aboriginals. Although these instances may appear simply descriptive, they are associated with ideas of racial purity ('caste' is derived from the Latin word *castus*, meaning 'pure') and the weakening of the supposedly superior white race through racial mixing. Thus, the concept of half-caste was negative, and mixed-race children were stigmatized and treated as outsiders.

Systems aimed at classifying humans as part of the natural world were crucial in challenging the dominance of theological thinking and thereby promoting a scientific worldview. Yet they also provided a racialized way of thinking about human life and cultures, lending scientific credence to ideas of white superiority. Biologists and sociologists today view race as a thoroughly discredited scientific concept. Biologists report that there are no clear-cut races, just a range of physical variations in the human species. Differences in physical type arise from population inbreeding, which varies according to the degree of contact between different groups. The genetic diversity *within* populations that share visible physical traits is just as great as the diversity *between* those populations. As a result of such findings, the scientific community has virtually abandoned the analytical use of the concept of race. You will find that some sociological papers and books place the word 'race' in 'scare quotes' to emphasize its unscientific, problematic status, though this is not absolutely necessary and we do not adopt it here.

UNESCO (1978) recognized these findings in its Declaration on Race and Racial Prejudice, which noted that 'All human beings belong to a single species and are descended from a common stock. They are born equal in dignity and rights and all form an integral part of humanity.' And yet, as our brief examples from contemporary football show, the material consequences of the persistent belief in the existence of distinct races with differing natural abilities are a telling illustration of W. I. Thomas's (1928) famous theorem that, 'when men [*sic*] define situations as real, then they are real in their consequences.' If so, then sociologists cannot ignore the ways in which the concept of race is understood and used in social life.

As we will see in this chapter, discrimination on grounds of race or ethnicity has long been and remains a major social problem. It is not possible to do justice to the many forms of ethnicity and ethnic divisions around the world in such a short chapter. Hence, our primary focus will be on the situation in the UK, though we will draw on a range of examples from other countries where necessary. After considering the ways in which the concepts of race and ethnicity are used in academic sociology and the wider society, we look at prejudice,

discrimination and racism and then outline sociological theories that help to explain their persistence. One question we address is why racial and ethnic divisions can turn into conflict. From there, the chapter covers ethnic diversity, models of integration – including multiculturalism – and examples of ethnic conflict. The final section looks at the increasing scale and significance of global migration and geographical mobility, both of which reshape relations between ethnic groups and increase national cultural diversity (Vertovec 2007).

Key concepts

Race

Race is one of the most complex concepts in sociology, not least because its supposedly 'scientific' basis is now rejected by scholars. Despite this, there remains widespread, everyday use of the term, as many people hold onto the naïve belief that human beings *can* be separated into biologically distinct 'races'. Since the late eighteenth century, there have been numerous attempts by academics and governments to establish categories of people based on skin colour or racial type. These schemes have never been consistent, with some identifying just four or five major races and others recognizing as many as three dozen. This diversity does not provide a reliable basis for social scientific research.

In many ancient civilizations, distinctions were often made between social groups on visible skin colour differences, usually lighter and darker skin tones. However, before the modern period, it was more common for perceived distinctions to be based on tribal or kinship affiliations. These groups were numerous and the basis of their classification was relatively unconnected to modern ideas of race, with its biological or genetic connotations. Instead, classification rested on cultural similarity and group membership. Theories of racial difference linked to supposedly scientific methods were devised in the mid- to late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and used to justify the emerging social order, as Britain and other colonial European nations ruled over subject territories and overseas populations.

Some social scientists argue that race is nothing more than an ideological construct whose use in academic circles perpetuates the commonly held belief that it has a basis in reality (Miles 1993). It should therefore be abandoned. Others disagree, claiming that race still has real-world effects and cannot be ignored. In historical terms, race has been an extremely important concept used by powerful social groups as part of their strategies of domination (Spencer 2014). For example, the contemporary situation of African Americans in the USA cannot be understood without reference to the slave trade, racial

segregation and persistent racial ideologies. Racial distinctions are more than ways of describing human differences – they are also important factors in the reproduction of patterns of power and inequality. Banton (2015: 22) notes that the concept of race is embedded within the standard forms used in healthcare, job applications, the census and many more. Hence, 'Once a classificatory procedure like this has been embedded in social institutions, an equal force has to be mobilized if it is to be changed.' Thus, race remains a vital, if highly contested concept which sociologists have to explore wherever it is in use.

THINKING CRITICALLY

How is the term 'race' used in society? Examine some news and other media content noting how the word is employed. Is it used with reference to biological characteristics, for instance, or aspects of particular cultures?

The process through which understandings of race are used to classify individuals or groups of people is called racialization. Historically, some groups of people came to be labelled as distinct on the basis of naturally occurring physical features. From the fifteenth century onwards, as white Europeans came increasingly into contact with people from different regions of the world, attempts were made to categorize and explain both natural and social phenomena. Non-white populations in those regions were racialized in opposition to the perceived white European race. In some instances, this racialization took on codified institutional forms, as in the case of slavery in the American colonies and apartheid in South Africa. More commonly, however, everyday social institutions became racialized in a *de facto* manner.

Racialization has also occurred *within* Europe – for example, in relation to the discrimination against and exclusion of Roma populations in European nation-states. In a racialized system, aspects of individuals' daily lives – employment, personal relations, housing, healthcare, education and legal representation – are shaped and constrained by their position within that system of stratification.

[Ethnicity](#)

While the idea of race implies something fixed and biological, [ethnicity](#) is a source of identity whose basis lies in society and culture. Ethnicity refers to a type of social identity related to ancestry (perceived or real) and cultural differences which become active in certain contexts. It has a longer history than race and is closely related to the concepts of nation and race, as all three refer to the idea of a class or category of people (Fenton 2010: 14–15).

Global society 8.1 Colonialism and the Atlantic slave trade

Slavery is as old as organized human society and was part of the social structure of numerous classical civilizations, from Babylonia and Egypt to the Roman Empire and ancient Greece. The taking of slaves can be seen as one form of coercive labour, which also includes convict labour, serfdom and indentured labour (Black 2011). The Atlantic slave trade covers the period from the first Portuguese cargo of black slaves in 1441 to 1870, when the slave trade was effectively ended. Legal abolition occurred earlier in some countries, for example, in Denmark (1792), Britain (1807) and the USA (1808), but illegal trading continued for much longer, as did slavery.

Thomas (1997: 11) notes that Atlantic slave trading was 'a commercial undertaking involving the carriage of millions of people, stretching over several hundred years, involving every maritime European nation, every Atlantic-facing people (and some others), and every country of the Americas.' Varied estimates put the number of black African people traded over this period to be between 11 and 13 million, transported to a range of countries, primarily Brazil, the West Indies and across the Spanish Empire, and mainly for forced labour on sugar and coffee plantations, in cotton and cocoa fields, and in mines, building work and domestic service. Some 1.8 million Africans also died during the long voyages (Araujo 2017: 1). The overwhelming majority of these people were sold by local merchants or noblemen, and, as tables 8.1a and 8.1b illustrate, the slave trade was a significant part of the exploitative colonial expansion pursued by Portugal, Spain, Britain, Holland and others, profits from which helped to fund their overseas enterprises and domestic industrial development.

Black (2011) argues that, historically, slavery and racism are not necessarily linked in every case, though slavery does involve the creation of an outsider group, an 'other', that is seen as closer to nature and in some ways less human than the slavers themselves.

This is very clear in documentary evidence from slave traders. Thomas (1997: 397–8, 549) reports that one French captain described Congolese slaves as 'robust, indifferent to fatigue … sweet and tranquil, born to serve', while a Portuguese official noted in the early eighteenth century that, in trading terms, there was 'no difference between negroes and goods'. In an 1804 British House of Commons debate on abolishing the trade, an MP opposed to abolition said that 'he had never heard the Africans deny their mental inferiority'. Such overtly racist views were ridiculed even at the time, but, as we saw in the chapter introduction, a scientific gloss was added in some interpretations of the taxonomic systems devised in the eighteenth century as applied to human beings. Similarly, the racist incidents seen at football grounds in recent years show that these very old racist tropes are still in play in the world's self-styled 'civilized' nations.

Table 8.1a Transportation of slaves, by carrying country

Source: Adapted from Thomas (1997).

Country	Voyages	Slaves transported
Portugal	30,000	4,650,000
Britain	12,000	2,600,000
Spain	4,000	1,600,000
France	4,200	1,250,000
Holland	2,000	500,000
British North America & US	1,500	300,000
Denmark	250	50,000
Other	250	50,000
Total	54,200	11,000,000

Table 8.1b Number of slaves transported, by destination

Source: Thomas (1997: 804).

Country	Slaves transported
Brazil	4,000,000
Spanish Empire (including Cuba)	2,500,000
British West Indies	2,000,000
French West Indies (including Cayenne)	1,600,000
British North America & US	500,000
Europe (including Portugal, Canary Islands, Madeira, Azores, etc.)	200,000
Dutch West Indies (including Suriname)	500,000
Danish West Indies	28,000
Total	11,328,000

THINKING CRITICALLY

Campaigns for former slave-trading and slave-owning countries to make reparations – from apologies, to the removal of monuments to slave-owners and financial compensation – have gathered strength over recent decades. Janna Thompson (2017) argues that, despite the oftrepeated charge of unfairness, current generations benefited from the slave trade and *should* make reparations to descendants of slaves and the communities that were negatively affected. Leaving aside practical and financial issues, construct an argument that reparations for today's citizens would be both *fair* and *just* for everyone.

Like nations, ethnic groups are 'imagined communities' whose existence depends on the self-identification of their members. Members of ethnic groups may see themselves as culturally distinct from other groups and are seen by them, in return, as different. In this sense,

'Ethnic groups always co-exist with other ethnic groups' (Pilkington 2015: 73). Several characteristics may serve to distinguish ethnic groups, but the most usual are language, a sense of shared history or ancestry, religion, and styles of dress or adornment.

Ethnic differences are learned, a point that seems self-evident until we remember how often some groups are regarded as 'born to rule' or 'naturally lazy', 'unintelligent', and so on. Indeed, when people use the term 'ethnicity', very often they do so (as with race) when referring to ascriptive characteristics such as skin colour, blood ties or place of birth. Yet there is nothing innate about ethnicity: it is a social phenomenon that is produced and reproduced over time. For many people, ethnicity is central to their individual and group identity, but for others it is irrelevant and, for still others, seems significant only during times of conflict or social unrest. Ethnicity can provide an important thread of continuity with the past and is often kept alive through the practices of cultural traditions. For instance, third-generation Americans of Irish descent may proudly identify themselves as Irish American and celebrate Saint Patrick's Day despite having lived their entire lives in the United States.

Sociologists favour the concept of ethnicity over race because it carries no inaccurate biological reference. However, 'ethnicity' can also be problematic if it implies a contrast with some 'non-ethnic' norm. In Britain, for example, 'ethnicity' is commonly used in the press and among the wider white British population to refer to cultural practices and traditions that differ from 'indigenous' (i.e. 'non-ethnic') British practices. The term 'ethnic' is applied in this way to cuisine, clothing, music and neighbourhoods to designate practices that are 'non-British'. Using ethnic labels in this manner risks producing divisions between 'us' and 'them', where certain parts of the population are seen as 'ethnic' while others are not, resulting in more powerful groups perceiving themselves as the 'natural' norm from which all other 'ethnic' groups diverge. In fact, ethnicity is an attribute possessed by *all* members of a population, not just certain segments of it.

There is a further problem with the concept of ethnicity as it has come to be used in sociology, since, in practice, many studies make use of the idea of actually existing and identifiable 'ethnic groups'. This is

particularly the case in studies of ethnic conflicts, such as that between Serbs, Albanians and Croats in the former Yugoslavia. This 'groupism' represents 'the tendency to take discrete, bounded groups as basic constituents of social life, chief protagonists of social conflicts, and fundamental units of social analysis' (Brubaker 2006: 8). It also suggests that such conflicts are actually *caused by* ethnic or cultural differences.

Yet if ethnicity really is entirely a social creation which becomes effective only in certain situations and at certain times, then we cannot accept the notion of an ethnic group as a 'primordial' or essential thing in itself, unrelated to social context (A. D. Smith 1998). Of course, in real-world situations, participants may well perceive that they are acting on behalf of or to defend a cohesive and objectively real ethnic group. However, the sociologist's task is not to accept these perceptions at face value but to understand how and why this hardening of ethnic identification happens, under what circumstances and with what consequences.

The concept of 'identity' is introduced in , 'Social Interaction and Daily Life'.

Minority ethnic groups

The notion of minority ethnic groups (often 'ethnic minorities') is widely used in sociology and is more than a merely numerical distinction. There are many minority groups in a statistical sense, such as people over 6 feet tall or those wearing shoes bigger than size 12/48, but these are not minority ethnic groups according to the sociological concept. In sociology, members of a minority ethnic group are disadvantaged when compared with the dominant group – a group possessing more wealth, power and prestige – and have some sense of *group solidarity*, of belonging together. The experience of being the

subject of prejudice and discrimination tends to heighten feelings of common loyalty and interests.

Thus sociologists frequently use the term 'minority' in a non-literal way to refer to a group's subordinate position within society rather than its numerical representation. There are many cases in which a 'minority' is in fact in the numerical majority. In some geographical areas, such as inner cities, minority ethnic groups make up the majority of the population but are nonetheless referred to as 'minorities'. This is because the term 'minority' captures their disadvantaged positions. Women are sometimes described as a minority group, while in many countries of the world they form the numerical majority. Yet, because women tend to be disadvantaged in comparison with men (the 'majority'), the term is also applied to them.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

8.1 Black identity and the 'new ethnicities'

Use of the term 'black' to describe individuals and groups has undergone fundamental transformation since the 1960s and remains highly contested. In the UK until the 1960s, non-white people were conventionally described as 'coloured', and, for some time after that, 'black' was a derogatory label assigned by whites as a term of abuse. Only in the mid-1960s did Americans and Britons of African descent begin to reclaim the term 'black' for themselves. The slogan 'black is beautiful' and the motivational concept of 'black power' were central to the black liberation movement in the USA. These ideas were used to counter the symbolic domination of 'whiteness' over 'blackness'.

In the UK, the concept of 'black' as a collective identity became increasingly used in relation to various African, Caribbean and South Asian communities. Hall (2006 [1989]) argues that adopting a black identity was the first stage in a cultural politics of resistance that referenced a common experience of racism across various minority ethnic groups in Britain. This 'moment' or stage produced a certain unity of experience, a 'necessary fiction' that was and continues to be politically useful in struggles against racism and discrimination. According to Hall (1991: 55),

> That notion [black identity] was extremely important in the anti-racist struggles of the 1970s: the notion that people of diverse societies and cultures would all come to Britain in the fifties and sixties as part of that huge wave of migration from the Caribbean, East Africa, the Asian subcontinent, Pakistan, Bangladesh, from different parts of India, and all identified themselves politically as Black.

Nonetheless, this conception of 'black' *is* a fiction that simply reverses the racist message that 'white is good, black is bad' without moving beyond the polarization (Procter 2004: 123). Modood

(1994) argued that 'black' was used too loosely and overemphasized oppression based on skin colour, implying an 'essential' identity which does not exist in people's real experience. From the late 1980s, some scholars and members of minority ethnic groups saw this unified black identity as silencing the experience of South Asian people, who sought to draw on their own traditions and cultural resources: 'just as "Black" was the cutting edge of a politics vis-à-vis one kind of enemy, it could also, if not understood properly, provide a kind of silencing in relation to another. These are the costs, as well as the strengths, of trying to think of the notion of Black as an essentialism' (Hall 1991: 56).

Hall (2006 [1989]: 200) sees a second stage or 'moment' beginning in the mid-1980s. In this stage there is a recognition that a sense of solidarity can be achieved 'without being dependent on certain fixed notions of racial and ethnic identity' (Davis 2004: 183–4). In this second moment, 'new ethnicities' break apart the previous monolithic representations of white and black cultures as bad and good respectively. In short, this stage is one in which differences between ethnic groups and differences within specific groups are acknowledged and a range of new voices are heard.

For example, Hanif Kureishi's 1985 film *My Beautiful Laundrette* rejects simple oppositions of black/white and good/bad. Instead, it shows some Asians to be materialistic and exploitative businessmen, aspiring to middle-class status, and others as drug dealers – not typical victims of a white, racist culture. The film 'refuses a positive, "right-on" version of black culture', showing many internal divisions and differences (Procter 2004: 129). It also deals with sexualities, gender and class as multiple sources of identity, refusing to prioritize any single form of identification over the others. Cultural products such as this are part of the construction of a more diverse conception of ethnicity which works to 'demarginalise and validate ethnic forms in the experiences of the ethnic communities from which it draws its strength' (Rojek 2003: 181).

Some scholars have favoured speaking of 'minorities' to refer collectively to groups that have experienced prejudice at the hands of the 'majority' society. The term 'minorities' draws attention to the pervasiveness of discrimination by highlighting the commonality of experience of various subordinate groups. As an example, disablist attitudes, anti-Semitism, homophobia and racism share many features in common, and discrimination and prejudice can take similar forms. At the same time, speaking collectively of 'minorities' can result in generalizations about discrimination and oppression that do not accurately reflect the experiences of specific groups.

Prejudice and discrimination

Prejudice and discrimination have been widespread in human history, and we must distinguish clearly between them. Prejudice refers to opinions or attitudes held by members of one group towards another. A prejudiced person's preconceived views are often based on hearsay rather than on direct evidence and are resistant to change even in the face of new information. People may harbour favourable prejudices about groups with which they identify and negative prejudices against others. Someone who is prejudiced against a particular group may not deal with its members impartially.

Prejudices are frequently grounded in stereotypes – fixed and inflexible characterizations of a social group. Stereotypes are often applied to minority ethnic groups, such as the idea that all black men are naturally athletic or that all East Asians are hard-working, diligent students. Some stereotypes contain a grain of truth; others are simply a mechanism of displacement, in which feelings of hostility or anger are directed against objects that are not the real origin of those feelings. Stereotypes become embedded in cultural understandings and are difficult to erode, even when they are gross distortions of reality. The belief that single mothers are dependent on welfare and refuse to work is an example of a persistent stereotype that lacks empirical grounding. A large number of single mothers do work, and many who receive welfare benefits would prefer to work but have no access to childcare.

Scapegoating is common when ethnic groups come into competition with one another for economic resources. People who direct racial attacks against ethnic minorities, for example, are often in a similar economic position. A poll by Stonewall in 2003 found that half of all people who felt 'hard done by' believed that immigrants and ethnic minorities were taking priority over them, thus blaming ethnic minorities for grievances whose real causes lie elsewhere (Stonewall 2003; *The Economist* 2004). Scapegoating is normally directed against groups that are distinctive and relatively powerless, because they make an easy target. Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Italians, black Africans, Muslims, gypsies and others have played the unwilling role of scapegoat at various times throughout Western history.

If prejudice describes attitudes and opinions, discrimination refers to actual behaviour towards another group or individual. A report by the European Union Fundamental Rights Agency on racism and xenophobia (EUFRA 2007) listed numerous examples of discrimination in some European countries, including poor housing provision for minority ethnic groups, a lack of adequate educational provision for Romany children, and rising levels of racist violence and crime in eight European member states – Denmark, Germany, France, Ireland, Poland, Slovakia, Finland, and England and Wales.

Discrimination can be seen in activities that disqualify members of one group from opportunities open to others. Although prejudice is often the basis of discrimination, the two may exist separately. For example, white house-buyers might steer away from purchasing properties in predominantly black neighbourhoods, not because of attitudes of hostility they might have towards those who live there, but because of worries about declining property values. Prejudiced attitudes in this case influence discrimination, but in an indirect way.

Anti-semitic attitudes did not die off after 1945, as this attack on a Jewish cemetery in Germany shows.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Is it possible for people to be prejudiced and yet not behave in discriminatory ways? Should we be prepared to accept prejudice as 'normal' if it does not turn into discrimination?

The persistence of racism

One form of prejudice is racism, prejudice based on socially significant physical distinctions. A racist may be defined as someone who believes that some individuals or groups are superior or inferior to others on the basis of racialized differences. Racism is commonly thought of as behaviour or attitudes held by certain individuals or groups. An individual may profess racist beliefs or may join in with a group, such as a white supremacist organization, which promotes a racist agenda. Yet

many have argued that racism is more than simply the ideas held by a small number of bigoted individuals.

The concept of institutional racism was developed in the USA in the late 1960s by civil rights campaigners, who saw that racism underpinned American society rather than merely representing the opinions of a small minority of people (Omi and Winant 1994). The concept suggests that racism pervades all of society's structures in a systematic manner. According to this view, institutions such as the police, the health service and the education system all promote policies that favour certain groups while discriminating against others.

A highly significant investigation into the practices of the London Metropolitan Police Service (the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry – see 'Classic studies' 8.1) used and built on a definition of institutional racism devised by Stokely Carmichael, a US civil rights campaigner in the 1960s: 'The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people' (Macpherson 1999: 6.34). The Macpherson Inquiry (see box below) found that institutional racism did exist within the police force and criminal justice system. Institutional racism has also been revealed in culture and the arts, for instance in spheres such as television broadcasting (negative or limited portrayal of ethnic minorities in programming) and the international modelling industry (an industry-wide bias against non-white fashion models).

[Classic studies 8.1](#) Institutional racism – the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry

The research problem

The overwhelming majority of 'Classic studies' chosen for this book are pieces of research or theoretical studies conducted by professional sociologists. Yet, sometimes, research conducted by public bodies or investigators on behalf of government has such a farreaching impact that it takes on the status of a classic. The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, carried out by Sir William Macpherson (1999), is a good example.

In 1993, a black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, was murdered in a racially motivated attack by five white youths as he was waiting at a bus stop with a friend in south-east London. The attackers stabbed him twice and left him on the pavement to die. At the time, no one was convicted of his murder. However, in November 2011, eighteen years after Stephen Lawrence died, two men were finally found guilty after new forensic evidence was uncovered.

Macpherson's explanation

As a result of the perseverance of Stephen Lawrence's parents, three of the suspects were brought to trial in 1996, but the case collapsed when a judge ruled that the evidence presented by one witness was inadmissible. Jack Straw, then home secretary, announced a full inquiry into the Lawrence case in 1997; its findings were published in 1999 in the Macpherson Report. The commission concluded that the police investigation into Stephen Lawrence's murder had been mishandled from the very start (Macpherson 1999).

Police arriving on the scene made little effort to pursue the attackers and displayed a lack of respect for Stephen's parents, denying them access to information about the case to which they were entitled. An erroneous assumption was made that Lawrence had been involved in a street brawl rather than being an innocent victim of an unprovoked racist attack. Police surveillance of the

suspects was poorly organized and conducted with a 'lack of urgency'; searches of the suspects' dwellings, for example, were not performed thoroughly, despite tips describing where weapons might be concealed. Senior officers who were in a position to intervene in the case to correct such mistakes failed to do so. During the course of the investigation and subsequent inquiries into it, police withheld vital information, protected one another, and refused to take responsibility for mistakes. The authors (Macpherson 1999: 46.1) of the report were unequivocal in their findings:

> The conclusions to be drawn from all the evidence in connection with the investigation of Stephen Lawrence's racist murder are clear. There is no doubt but that there were fundamental errors. The investigation was marred by a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers.

The charge of *institutional racism* was one of the most important outcomes of the inquiry. Not just the Metropolitan Police Service, but the criminal justice system itself were implicated in this collective failure. The report (1999: 46.27) concluded that 'it is incumbent upon every institution to examine their policies and the outcome of their policies' to ensure that no segment of the population be disadvantaged. Seventy recommendations were set forth for improving the way in which racist crimes are policed. Among these were 'race-awareness' training for police officers, stronger disciplinary powers to remove racist officers, clearer definitions of what constitutes a racist incident, and a commitment to increasing the total number of black and Asian officers in the police force. In 2015, the National Crime Agency began an inquiry into claims that corrupt police officers acted to shield Stephen Lawrence's murderers (Dodd 2015).

Critical points

Although the report's conclusions were welcomed by many, some thought it did not go far enough. Stephen Lawrence's mother, Doreen Lawrence, said at the time that the police had investigated

her son's murder like 'white masters during slavery', and, although she was positive about the report's honest appraisal of police failings, it had 'only scratched the surface' of racism within the police force. The most contentious part of the report was its central finding, that not just the Metropolitan Police Service but the criminal justice system as a whole was 'institutionally racist'. The Police Complaints Commission (PCC) found 'no evidence' of racist conduct by the police, and the idea of 'unwitting racism' in the report's definition of institutional racism has been criticized as too general. Echoing the PCC's conclusions, Michael Ignatieff wrote that the real issues from the case were not 'race' and 'race awareness', but 'institutionalized incompetence' and 'equal justice before the law' (cited in Green 2000).

Contemporary significance

The Macpherson Report did not deliver justice for Stephen Lawrence, but it did help to change the way that people in the UK and elsewhere think about racially motivated crime and its prosecution. The concept of institutional racism, devised in the civil rights struggles of late 1960s America, was accepted in an official report commissioned by government and led to a statutory duty for all public bodies to pursue racial equality. In this way, the Lawrence Inquiry not only imposed new demands on the criminal justice system; it also marked a significant change in discourses of race in British society.

From 'old' to 'new' forms of racism

Just as the concept of biological race has been discredited, so too old-style, officially legitimized systems of racism are hard to find today. The end of legalized segregation in the United States and the collapse of apartheid rule in South Africa were important turning points in the rejection of biological racism. In both cases, racist attitudes directly associated physical traits with biological inferiority. Such ideas are less commonly heard in public today other than in the cases of violent hate crimes or the online platforms of extremist or far-right groups. This is

not to say that racist attitudes have disappeared from modern societies. Rather, as some scholars argue, they have been replaced by a more subtle, sophisticated [new racism](#) (or *cultural racism*), which uses the idea of cultural differences to exclude certain groups (Barker 1981).

Those who argue that a 'new racism' has emerged claim that cultural rather than biological arguments are employed in order to discriminate against minority groups. On this view, hierarchies of superiority and inferiority are constructed according to the values of the majority culture. Those groups that stand apart from the majority can become marginalized or vilified for their refusal to 'assimilate'. It is alleged that new racism has a clear political dimension.

Prominent examples of a new racism are arguably seen in efforts by some American politicians to enact official English-only language policies and in the conflict in France over girls who wish to wear Islamic headscarves to school. Back (1995) argues that cultural racism means that we live in an age of 'multiple racisms', where discrimination is experienced differently across segments of the population. We can see this in relation to anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Jewish people around the world have long been the target of racial prejudice and discriminatory attitudes – known as anti-Semitism. Today anti-Semitism is most common from the far right of the political spectrum or those attracted to conspiracy theories blaming Jewish people for a range of economic and political problems. However, such views can also be found on the left. The most recent evidence of this is a spate of reports of anti-Semitism within the British Labour Party. Support for the right of Palestinians to build an independent state often involves criticism of Israeli government policies. However, some extend such criticisms into an anti-Zionist position, which is opposed to the very existence of the Israeli state as such. In 2018–19, the Labour Party received 673 complaints of anti-Semitic acts in ten months; ninety-six party members were suspended, twelve were expelled and several Labour MPs resigned over the party's handling of the issue (BBC News 2019e). The episode resulted in an investigation in 2019 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), which, at the time of writing, had yet to produce its report.

Hate speech and hate crimes against Muslims, known as Islamophobia, form another example of a new racism in Europe. In Western European societies, Muslims have, for some, become convenient scapegoats for a range of social problems, such as terrorism, sexual grooming of children, urban unrest and ethnic segregation. Portraying Muslims as an enemy, the 'other', means that 'Islamophobia upholds Eurocentrism, the dominant contemporary racialised system in Europe, where Western-identified subjects are awarded a better social, economic and political "racial contract" and seek to defend these privileges against real and imagined Muslim demands' (Jackson 2018: 2). In this way, we can see that Islamophobia is used as an 'instrument of power' by the majority population (Hafez 2016: 26–7). Jackson argues that Islamophobia may therefore have a form of self-interest at its centre rather than simply being ignorant hostility. If so, then it may be that, for some, racism in Europe is one aspect in the process of group closure (discussed later in this chapter), which functions to protect the advantages of established groups.

One way to understand why racism has persisted into the twenty-first century is to look at the connections between these old and new forms of racism. One explanation lies in the exploitative relations that Europeans established with non-white peoples during the era of colonialism when 'race science' was established. The Atlantic slave trade could not have been carried on had it not been widely believed by white Europeans that black people belonged to an inferior, even sub-human, race. Racism helped to justify colonial rule over non-white peoples and denied them the rights of political participation that were being won by whites in their European homelands. Some sociologists argue that exclusion from full citizenship remains a central feature of modern-day racism too.

Another reason lies in the response of some social groups within countries that encouraged inward migration in the post-1945 period, such as Britain, countries in Europe, and the USA and Canada. As the post-war economic boom faltered in the mid-1970s, and most Western economies moved from being short of labour (and having relatively open borders) to higher levels of unemployment, some began to believe that immigrants were responsible for work shortages and were

illegitimately claiming welfare benefits – the familiar idea of scapegoating. In practice this widely held fear is a myth. Migrant workers tend to complement local workers by doing the work that local people reject, providing valuable additional skills and creating new jobs. Similarly, migrant workers generally make a net contribution to society as taxpayers.

Sociological theories of racism

In looking for explanations for the persistence of racism, some of the concepts discussed above – such as stereotypical thinking and displacement – help to explain prejudice and discrimination through psychological mechanisms, but they tell us little about the social processes involved. To study such processes, we must turn to sociological concepts and theories.

Ethnocentrism, group closure and allocation of resources

Sociologists have used ideas of ethnocentrism, group closure and resource allocation to understand why racism persists. Ethnocentrism is a suspicion of outsiders combined with a tendency to evaluate the culture of others in terms of one's own culture. Virtually all cultures have been ethnocentric to some degree, and it is easy to see how ethnocentrism combines with stereotypical thought discussed above. Outsiders are thought of as aliens, barbarians or morally and mentally inferior. This was how most civilizations viewed the members of smaller cultures, for example, and the attitude has fuelled innumerable ethnic clashes in history.

Ethnocentrism and group closure, or ethnic group closure, frequently go together. 'Closure' refers to the process whereby groups maintain boundaries separating themselves from others. These boundaries are formed by means of exclusion devices, which sharpen the divisions between one ethnic group and another (Barth 1969). Such devices include limiting or prohibiting intermarriage between the groups, restrictions on social contact or economic relationships such as trading, and the physical separation of groups (as in the case of ethnic ghettos). African Americans have experienced all three exclusion devices in the

USA: racial intermarriage has been illegal in some states, economic and social segregation was enforced by law in the South, and segregated black ghettos still exist in major cities.

Global society 8.2 Racial segregation in apartheid South Africa

From 1948 until the first free multiracial election in 1994, South Africa was governed by apartheid – a state-enforced regime of racial segregation. The apartheid system classified people into one of four categories: *white* (descendants of European immigrants), *black* (native South African people), *coloured* (those of mixed race) and *Asian* (immigrants from China, Japan and elsewhere). The white South African minority – about 13 per cent of the population – ruled over the non-white majority. Non-whites could not vote and therefore had no representation at national level. Racial segregation – which had been introduced in the late nineteenth century – was now enforced at all levels of society, from public places such as washrooms, beaches and railway carriages to residential neighbourhoods and schools. Millions of black people were corralled into so-called homelands, well away from the main cities, and worked as migrant labourers in gold and diamond mines.

Apartheid was encoded in law but enforced through violence and brutality. The governing National Party used law enforcement and security services to suppress all resistance to the apartheid regime. Opposition groups were outlawed, political dissidents were detained without trial and often tortured, and peaceful demonstrations frequently ended in violence. After decades of international condemnation, economic and cultural sanctions, and growing internal resistance, the apartheid regime began to weaken. When F. W. de Klerk became president in 1989, he inherited a country already deep in crisis. In 1990, de Klerk lifted the ban on the main opposition party, the African National Congress (ANC), and freed its leader, Nelson Mandela, who had been imprisoned for twenty-seven years. Following a series of complex negotiations, South Africa's first national election took place on 27 April 1994; the ANC won, with 62 per cent of the vote. Nelson Mandela became South Africa's first postapartheid president.

From 1996 to 1998, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) held hearings across South Africa to expose and examine human rights abuses under apartheid. More than 21,000 testimonies were recorded during the process, laying bare the brutal apartheid regime. However, those who had committed crimes were offered amnesty in return for honest testimony and the 'full disclosure' of information. The apartheid government was identified as the main perpetrator of human rights abuses, though transgressions by other organizations, including the ANC, were also noted. Mandela stood down in 1999, but the ANC has been continuously in government since the apartheid era was ended.

Peace processes are discussed in detail in [chapter 21](#), 'Nations, War and Terrorism'.

Sometimes, groups of equal power mutually enforce lines of closure: their members keep separate from each other, but neither group dominates the other. More commonly, however, one ethnic group occupies a position of power over another. In these circumstances, group closure coincides with resource allocation, which institutes inequalities in the distribution of wealth and material goods. Some of the fiercest conflicts between ethnic groups centre on the lines of closure between them precisely because these lines signal inequalities in wealth, power or social standing.

The concept of ethnic group closure helps us to understand both the dramatic and the more insidious differences that separate communities of people from one another: not just why the members of some groups are murdered, attacked and harassed, but also why they do not get good jobs, a good education or a desirable place to live. Wealth, power and social status are scarce resources, and some groups have more of them than others. To hold on to their distinctive positions, privileged groups sometimes undertake extreme acts of violence against others.

Similarly, members of underprivileged groups may turn to violence as a means of trying to improve their own situation.

Conflict theories

Conflict theories are concerned with the links between racism and prejudice, on the one hand, and relationships of power and inequality, on the other. Early conflict approaches to racism were heavily influenced by Marxist ideas, which saw the economic system as the determining factor for all other aspects of society. Some Marxist theorists held that racism was a product of the capitalist system, arguing that the ruling class used slavery, colonization and racism as tools for exploiting labour (Cox 1959).

Later, neo-Marxist scholars saw these early formulations as too rigid and simplistic and suggested that racism was not the product of economic forces alone. A set of articles published in 1982 by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, *The Empire Strikes Back*, takes a broader view of the rise of racism. While agreeing that capitalist exploitation of labour and the 1970s economic crisis were underlying factors, that crisis was also 'organic'. This means that it combined with other elements such as the cultural and ideological legacy of colonialisms that is embedded within British institutions and society and the shift towards a more authoritarian British state apparatus in a time of economic crisis. This combination led to the emergence of a specific form of racism in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. Hence, racism is not simply the imposition of ruling-class ideas onto a passive society, nor can it be defined in a static, unchanging way. Racism is always a complex, shifting and multifaceted phenomenon involving the interplay of ideological, economic, political and cultural factors (Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies 1982).

From the mid-1980s, a new conflict perspective called <u>critical race theory</u> (CRT) began to develop in the field of legal studies in the USA, and this spread into studies of education, ethnic relations and political science during the 1990s and sport in the 2000s (Hylton 2009). CRT diverged from earlier theories of race and ethnicity in some important ways. In particular, critical race theorists are not just detached analysts of 'race relations' but activists, seeking to intervene to transform

unequal relations between ethnic groups. The perspective emerged as a reaction to and critique of mainstream legal theory, which was rooted in a broadly liberal position that saw a steady incremental progress towards equality in the development of the law and legal systems (Brown 2007). CRT rejects this linear story, arguing that the gains made by the 1960s civil rights movements were quickly eroded and positive legal precedents have not been followed through.

Delgado and Stefancic (2001: 7–10) outline the key aspects of CRT. First, racism, they contend, is not a deviation from the non-racist norm: racism is in fact the everyday 'normal' experience for 'people of colour' in the USA and, by extension, in many other societies. Racism is therefore not 'exceptional' but, rather, deeply embedded within legal systems and other social institutions, which is why it is so persistent. Because of this, formal ideas of equal treatment before the law deal only with very explicit types of racism, while everyday or micro forms continue without redress. Second, both white elites and the white working class stand to benefit materially from the operation of this 'normal' racism, hence large parts of the population have no real interest in working to alter the situation. This makes real change towards equality even harder to achieve.

CRT is also strongly social constructionist, since it notes (as we saw above) that 'races' are not immutable biological facts but social creations which perpetuate inequality. For example, during periods when there is a shortage of unskilled or semi-skilled labour and immigration is encouraged, black people may be depicted as hard-working and reliable. However, when unemployment levels are high, the same 'racial' group can be described in the mass media and by politicians as essentially lazy and prone to criminality. Such differential racialization illustrates how power is woven into ethnic relations.

See chapter 5, 'The Environment', chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life' and chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality' for discussions of the social constructionist approach.

Finally, critical race theorists argue that, given their history and experience, minority ethnic groups are uniquely able to articulate what racism means to its victims. For this reason, CRT tends to make extensive use of narrative and biographical methods to give voice to those who experience racism and thus bring this to the attention of scholars (Zamudio et al. 2011: 5; see Denzin et al. 2008). However, the ultimate goal of critical race theorists is an intensely practical one: to make their own necessary contribution to all of those social movements that try to move societies in the direction of greater social equality.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Give some contemporary examples of how racism may be related to group closure, ethnocentrism, resource allocation or social class. What does the perspective of critical race theory add to our understanding of the chosen examples?

Employment, housing and criminal justice

Work, housing and criminal justice are three areas which have been investigated by sociologists to monitor the very real effects of social and economic disadvantage resulting from the major social inequalities of gender, class and ethnicity. In this section we will briefly outline some key issues and themes in relation to the experiences of different ethnic groups in the UK and the persistence of racism. However, we also illustrate how race and ethnicity intersect with other forms of inequality to produce diverse patterns of advantage and disadvantage in employment opportunities, housing status and criminal justice.

Trends in employment

The earliest national survey of minority ethnic groups in Britain, conducted by the Policy Studies Institute (PSI) in the 1960s, found that most recent immigrants were clustered disproportionately in manual occupations within a small number of industries. Even those recent arrivals with specialized qualifications from their countries of origin tended to work in jobs that were incommensurate with their abilities. Discrimination on the basis of ethnic background was a common and overt practice, with some employers refusing to hire non-white workers or agreeing to do so only when there was a shortage of suitable white workers.

By the 1970s, employment patterns had shifted somewhat. Members of many minority ethnic groups continued to occupy semi-skilled or unskilled manual positions, but a growing number were employed in skilled manual work. However, very few were represented in professional and managerial positions. Regardless of changes in legislation to prevent racial discrimination in company hiring practices, social scientific research found that whites were consistently offered interviews and job opportunities in preference to equally qualified non-white applicants, a practice that has been found to continue today. For example, in 2016–17, researchers in the UK sent out 3,200 fictitious job applications covering a range of ethnic groups, all with the same skills, qualifications and experiences. Almost 25 per cent of white majority applications elicited a positive response, such as a callback, but only 15 per cent of minority ethnic group applications did so (see [table 8.2](#)). The worst discrimination was for those with Pakistani and Nigerian backgrounds, who would have had to send 70 and 80 per cent more applications respectively than the majority group in order to receive a positive response (Di Stasio and Heath 2019).

The third PSI survey in 1982 found that, with the exception of African-Asian and Indian men, minority ethnic groups had rates of unemployment twice as high as whites. This was primarily a result of the economic recession, which had a strong impact on the manufacturing sector in which large numbers of minority ethnic workers were employed. Qualified non-whites with fluent English, however, were increasingly entering white-collar positions, and on the

whole there was a narrowing in the wage gap between ethnic minorities and whites. A growing number took up self-employment, contributing to higher earnings and lower levels of unemployment, especially among Indians and African Asians.

Table 8.2 Positive responses (callback) by minority status of the applicant

Source: Di Stasio and Heath (2019).

	Majority group	Pakistani		Nigerian		All other groups	
	rate	rate	ratio	rate	ratio	rate	ratio
All occupations	24.1	13.9	1.7	13.1	1.8	15.8	1.5
High-skilled occupations	25.8	18.3	1.4	11.7	2.2	20.2	1.3
All other occupations	23.2	11.9	1.9	13.7	1.7	13.6	1.7
All occupations – men	21.8	11.5	1.9	11.1	2.0	15.4	1.4
All occupations – women	26.5	16.6	1.6	15.7	1.7	16.2	1.6

Some scholars suggested that 1980s and 1990s de-industrialization had a disproportionate impact on minority ethnic groups. However, this conventional view was challenged by findings from the PSI surveys and comparisons of Labour Force Survey and census statistics. Using data from three decades of Labour Force Surveys and censuses (1971, 1981 and 1991), Iganski and Payne (1999) found that, overall, minority ethnic groups experienced *lower* levels of job loss than the rest of the industrial labour force.

The fourth PSI survey in 1997 (Modood et al. 1997) also found employment patterns varied among non-white women. Black Caribbean women were much less likely to be in manual work than white women, while Indian and Pakistani women tended to be in manual jobs. There was a much higher level of economic activity among black Caribbean and Indian women, but Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were less active in the labour market. On average, Caribbean and Indian women tended to have slightly higher full-time earnings than white women, although among Indian women there was a sharp polarization between those on relatively high incomes and those on low incomes.

The substantial gains made by certain minority ethnic groups should not be mistaken for the end of occupational disadvantage. Such 'collective social mobility' demonstrates that the forces of post-industrial restructuring are stronger than those of racial discrimination and persistent disadvantage. More recent investigations have revealed the divergent employment trajectories of different ethnic groups. In 2010, the National Equality Panel reported that about 80 per cent of white and Indian men and between 50 and 70 per cent of men in other ethnic groups were in paid work (Hills et al. 2010). However, unemployment was relatively high (between 10 and 16 per cent) for black African, black Caribbean and other groups of black men. Around one-quarter of Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were in paid employment compared with about 50 per cent of women in all other groups.

This survey also found similar differences in relation to income levels between ethnic groups. The median net weekly income for white British men was 30 per cent higher than that for black and black British Caribbean men, while the incomes of the top 10 per cent of white British men were 22 per cent higher than those of the top 10 per cent of black or black British Caribbean men (Hills et al. 2010: 161). Similarly, across the overall income distribution, white men were thirty places higher (out of 100) in the distribution than Asian or Asian-British Bangladeshi men. Clearly, white men continue to enjoy significant economic advantages over most black and Asian minority groups in Britain.

Housing

Minority ethnic groups in Britain, as elsewhere in the developed world, tend to experience discrimination, harassment and material deprivation in the housing market. Since the early calls for immigration controls, housing has been at the forefront of struggles over resources between groups, and tendencies towards ethnic closure are evident.

As with employment patterns, differentials in the ownership, quality and type of housing vary across ethnic groups (see figure 8.1). Home-ownership is clearly linked to employment status, income and occupation. Data for England show that, between 2016 and 2018, 68

per cent of white British households were home-owners compared with just 20 per cent of black African and 17 per cent of Arab households, the lowest of any ethnic group. However, the highest level of home-ownership of any ethnic group was that of Indian households, at 74 per cent (MHCLG 2020). Hence, although the non-white population as a whole tends to be disadvantaged compared with whites in terms of housing, there are some important exceptions. Still, most ethnic minority groups are disproportionately housed in rented, substandard accommodation and tend to be over-represented among the homeless (but not rough sleepers) (Law 2009: 178).
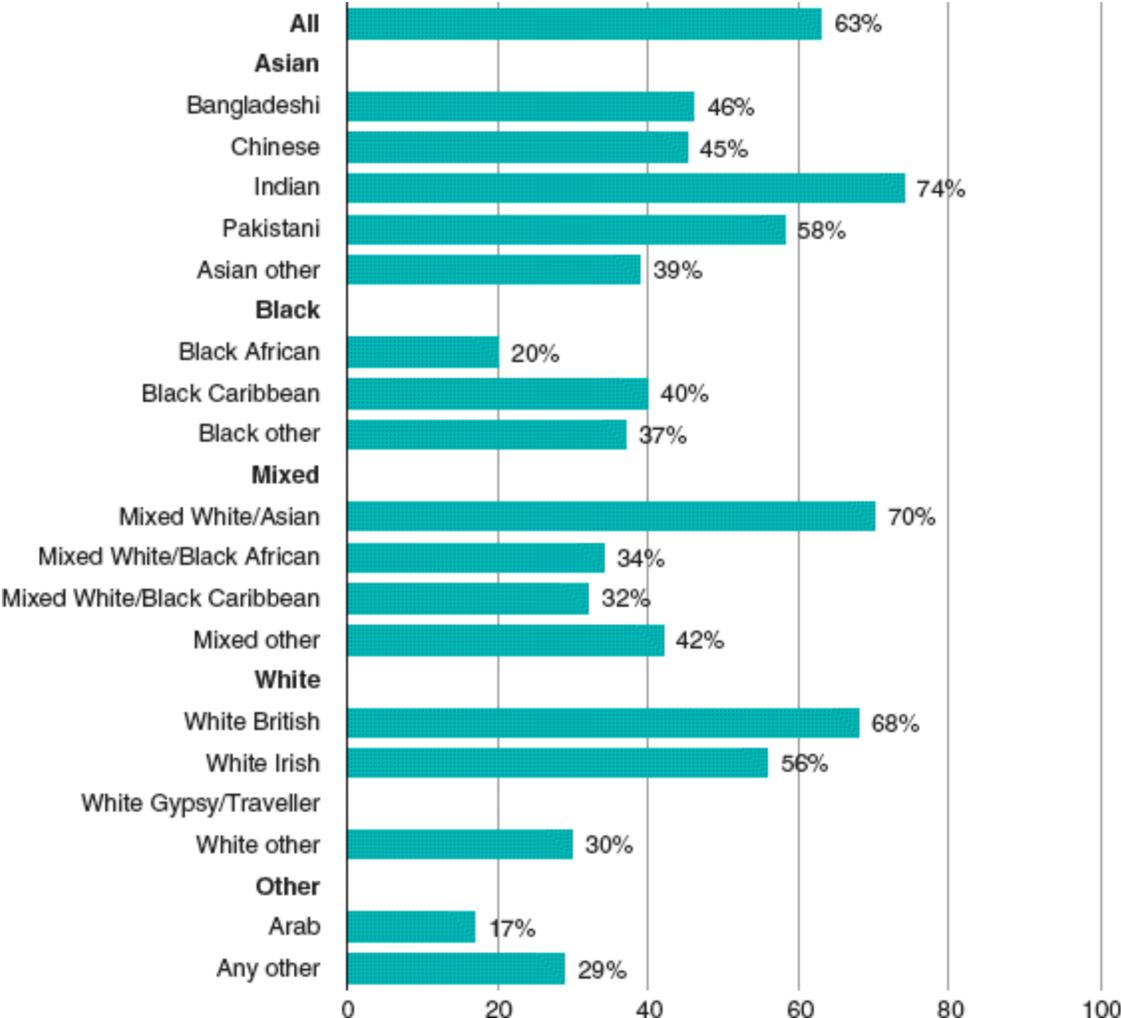
Figure 8.1 Percentage of households that own their own home, by ethnicity (England)

Source: MHCLG (2020).

Several factors contribute to housing differentials between non-white and white populations and across non-white groups. Racial harassment or violent attacks, which are still frequent in European countries, are likely to encourage a certain degree of ethnic segregation in housing tenure. In many European countries, evidence shows that Roma communities face the worst discrimination in relation to available and affordable housing (EUFRA 2007). Non-white families with the means to move into more affluent, predominantly white neighbourhoods may be dissuaded from doing so because they face hostility.

Another factor relates to the physical condition of housing. A high proportion of Pakistanis and Bangladeshis live in accommodation that is overcrowded – partly because of the large average size of households – and their housing tends to be susceptible to damp and more likely to lack central heating. By contrast, people of Indian origin are just as likely as whites to occupy detached or semi-detached homes and are less likely than other ethnic groups to reside in inner-city neighbourhoods. African-Caribbean households, on the other hand, are much more likely to rent accommodation in the social housing sector than to become home-owners. This may be related to the high proportion of lone-parent families within this ethnic group. Cockerham (2020) argues that substandard housing is a significant factor leading to higher levels of poor health among some minority ethnic groups, but such health inequalities are strongly correlated with social class position.

See also chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability', for a wider discussion of health inequalities.

Understanding the intersecting social inequalities of class, ethnicity and gender has formed the basis of much recent sociological research, and intersectionality has informed attempts to improve public services for ethnic minorities. The complex intertwining of inequalities of age,

sexuality, disability, class, ethnicity and gender produces a wide variety of social positions and identities in society. Intersectional research in sociology is helping policy-makers to understand better the diversity of contemporary social inequalities and to produce social policy that is more attuned to the different needs of social groups and individuals.

Intersectionality is discussed in detail in chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class', and is also covered in chapters 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare', 14, 'The Life Course', and 17, 'Work and the Employment'.

Disparities in housing can be seen as an example of the racist attitudes within society, which, as we saw in the Macpherson Report, are institutionally embedded in many public services (Karlsen 2007). We can see this particularly strongly in relation to the operation of the criminal justice system.

The criminal justice system

Since the 1960s, members of minority ethnic groups have been over-represented in the criminal justice system, both as offenders and as victims. Compared with their distribution in the overall population, minority ethnic groups are over-represented in the prison population. In 2019, 27 per cent of the prison population of England and Wales identified as an ethnic minority compared with just 13 per cent in the general population (Sturge 2018: 11). This proportion has been roughly stable since 2005. Young black men are also more likely than whites to be in youth custody. In 2010, black and other minority ethnic young men made up 39 per cent of the population of youth jails in England and Wales, a rapid rise from 23 per cent in 2006 (Travis 2011).

There is good reason to believe that members of minority ethnic groups suffer discriminatory treatment within the criminal justice system. The

number of 'stop-and-search' procedures of black and ethnic minority groups fell after the publication of the Macpherson Report in 1999 but rose again as police forces became more sensitive to terrorism associated with the terrorist al-Qaeda network. This has led to a rise in the number of cases where British Asians, many of whom are Muslims, have been stopped and searched, with police using new powers granted to them under the 2000 Terrorism Act.

However, Asian and black people, particularly young black men, are disproportionately subject to stop and search, and this pattern holds even as the total number of stop and searches fell between 2009–10 and 2019. In 2018–19 there were four stop and searches for every 1,000 white people, three per 1,000 white British people, but eleven per 1,000 Asian people and thirty-eight for every 1,000 black people (Race Disparity Unit 2020; [figure 8.2](#)). Across all cases of stop and search in 2018–19, 73 per cent resulted in no further action being taken by the police (Walker 2019). Bradford (2017: 10) notes that a number of social groups are more likely to be stopped and searched, including the unemployed, homeless people, victims of crime and young people. Nonetheless, he also argues that 'there is a level of ethnic disproportionality that cannot be "explained away" by other factors.' This disproportionality has long been perceived as unfair and contributes towards the negative perception of the police within black and other minority ethnic groups.

Stop and search has been hailed by the UK government as key to tackling violent crime. Yet the policy is controversial, as it has been used to search disproportionate numbers of minority ethnic groups.

There is also a higher rate of custodial sentencing among non-white people, even in cases where there are few or no previous convictions, and ethnic minorities are more likely to experience discrimination or racial attacks once imprisoned. The administration of criminal justice is overwhelmingly dominated by whites. In 2019, just 7 per cent of police officers were from minority ethnic backgrounds, though this was the highest proportion on record. At chief inspector rank and above, the proportion was just 4 per cent (Home Office 2019b: 7, 27), while 7 per cent of court judges identified as black and minority ethnic in 2018 (Courts and Tribunals Judiciary 2018: 1).

Minority ethnic groups are vulnerable to racism of varying kinds – including racially motivated attacks. Most escape such treatment, but the experience can be disturbing and brutal. The Institute of Race Relations (2019) reported that, in 2013–14, the police force in England

and Wales recorded 47,571 racist incidents, some 130 per day, though not all of these involved violence. The British Crime Survey has also found that emotional reactions to racially motivated incidents were generally more severe than for non-racially motivated incidents.

The experience of many people from minority ethnic groups, particularly young men, is that it is they who are the 'objects of violent exploitation' in their encounters with whites and, to some extent, with the police. Roger Graef's (1989) study of police practice concluded that the police were 'actively hostile to all minority groups', frequently using stereotypes and racial slurs when speaking about ethnic minorities. As the Lawrence Inquiry found, racism can pervade whole institutions. In the first year after the report, more than one-third of police forces had not hired any additional black or Asian officers, and the number of minority ethnic officers had actually fallen in nine out of forty-three forces in England and Wales.
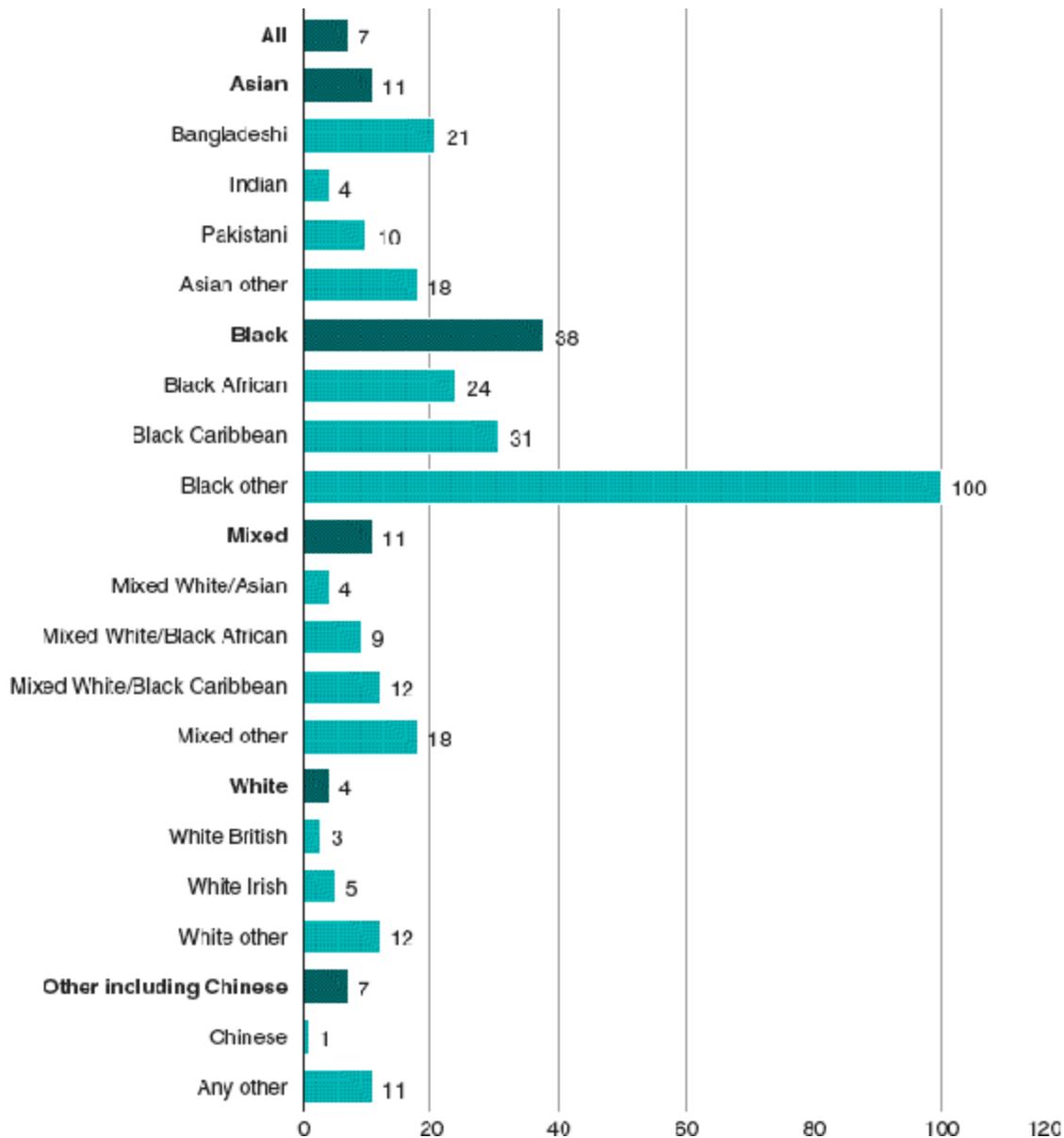
Figure 8.2 Stop-and-search rate (England and Wales) per 1,000 people, by ethnicity

Source: Race Disparity Unit (2020).

How can we account for these patterns of crime and victimization? Crime is not evenly distributed among the population. Areas that suffer from material deprivation generally have higher crime rates, and people living in such regions run a greater risk of falling victim to crime. The deprivations to which people exposed to racism are subject both help to produce and are produced by the decaying environment of inner cities (see chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life'). Here, there are

clear correlations between ethnicity, class, unemployment and crime. Yet the political and media focus on young black males without this wider contextualization has served to generate recurring moral panics that simplistically link race and crime.

The theory of moral panics is discussed in chapter 22, 'Crime and Deviance'.

Ethnic diversity, integration and conflict

Many states in the world today are characterized by multi-ethnic populations. Some Middle Eastern and Central European states, such as Turkey or Hungary, are ethnically diverse as a result of long histories of changing borders, occupations by foreign powers and regional migration. Other societies have become multi-ethnic more rapidly, as a result of policies encouraging migration or through colonialism and imperialism. In an age of globalization and rapid social change, international migration is accelerating, and the movement and mixing of human populations seems sure to intensify in the future. Meanwhile, ethnic tensions and conflicts continue to flare up in societies around the world, threatening the disintegration of some multi-ethnic states and protracted violence in others.

Ethnic diversity

The UK is today an ethnically diverse society. This diversity is an increasingly common feature of most industrialized societies and is key to understanding the policy of multiculturalism, which some governments have adopted to ensure that minority ethnic groups can enjoy the full benefits of citizenship. The population of England and Wales has become gradually more diverse, and around 14 per cent identified themselves as 'non-white' in the 2011 census (see figure 8.3). The 1991 census reported 94.1 per cent of the population identified themselves as being in the white ethnic group, but this fell to 91.3 per cent in 2001 and, again, to 86 per cent in 2011. Among the white ethnic group, 'white British' had similarly decreased, from 87.5 per cent in 2001 to 80.5 per cent in 2011.
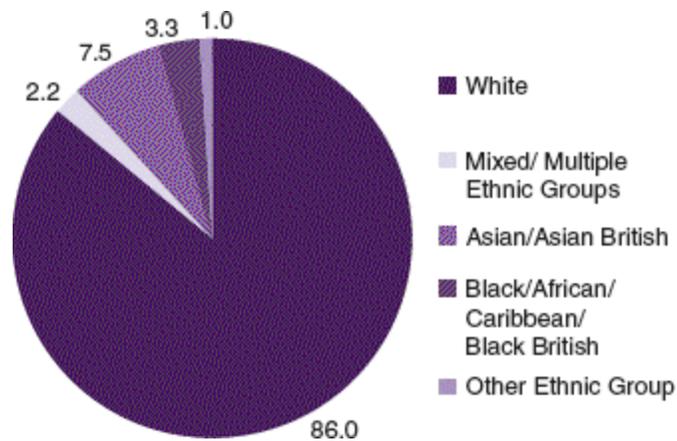
Figure 8.3 Ethnic groups, England and Wales, 2011

Source: ONS (2012: 3).

'Non-white' ethnic groups all saw increases in their populations over the same period. For example, both Indians and Pakistanis increased by around 400,000 between 2001 and 2011, making up 2.5 and 2 per cent of the total population respectively (ONS 2012: 1–5). The largest growth was in the 'any other white' category, which rose by 1.8 per cent between 2001 and 2011, an increase of 1.1 million people. This group consists primarily of people migrating from European countries, but also from Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. Between 2002 and 2009, the strongest growth was in the Chinese population, averaging an 8.6 per cent increase per year (ONS 2011).

It is important to note that immigration is now responsible for a declining proportion of minority ethnic populations in Britain, marking an important shift away from an 'immigrant population' to a 'non-white British' population with full citizenship rights. Since the 1991 UK census was the first to ask respondents to classify themselves in ethnic terms, comparing data across studies can be very difficult (Mason 1995). The number of people self-identifying as belonging to ethnic groups should be treated with caution. For example, respondents' understanding of their own ethnicity may be more complex than the options offered (Moore 1995). This is particularly true in the case of individuals identifying as of 'mixed ethnic groups', whose numbers have grown considerably to make up 2.2 per cent of the population in 2011, largely as a result of more 'ethnic mixing' than through increasing birth rates.

The 'non-white' population in England and Wales is concentrated in some of the most densely populated urban areas of England. London is easily the most ethnically diverse region, though, over the last fifteen years or so, many people of minority ethnic descent have left for other parts of England. One reason for this is the relatively younger age profile of the 'non-white' groups, as younger people in general tend to move around more than those in older age bands. There are also concentrations of specific minority groups in certain cities and regions. For example, in the East Midlands city of Leicester, the Asian-Indian population makes up 19 per cent of the total; in Bradford, Asian Pakistanis make up 13 per cent of residents; while the British African-Caribbean population is concentrated in some London boroughs (such as Lewisham) and the city of Birmingham (ONS 2011).

At this point it is worth stopping to consider the ethnic categories we have used in this section, which are those devised for the official 2001 census of England and Wales. What kind of categories are they? Is it legitimate to discuss Chinese, white British, black Caribbean, black African, Asian Indian and 'mixed: white and Asian' as 'ethnic groups'? Is Chinese an ethnic group or a nationality? Does the scheme confuse race with ethnicity? Also, the ONS classification divides 'Asian' into Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Indian and 'other', but the 'mixed' category (introduced for the first time in 2001) dispenses with this variation in favour of simply 'white and Asian'. Some categories appear to be loosely based on skin colour, some on geographical region and others on nationality. And why is 'white British' the only category to include 'Britishness'? What are we to make of such an apparently inconsistent scheme?

Ethnic group classification schemes do not simply describe an external social world 'out there' but in some ways also contribute to the social construction of ethnicity and race and our understanding of what these terms mean. This is particularly the case with official government schemes, which form the basis for policy-making in important areas such as housing, welfare, immigration and employment. The current highly charged discourse on immigration is replete with references to growing minority ethnic populations and the burden on health and social services. Hence, the ONS classification scheme reflects not just certain characteristics of the population of England and Wales but also

the current political framework of debate on immigration and British identity.

Since the mid-2000s, some sociologists and official bodies have become keenly aware that ethnic diversity has increased. In particular, it can no longer be assumed (if ever it could) that members of specific ethnic groups and communities share the same life chances. Vertovec (2006, 2007) coined the term super-diversity to describe the increasingly complex level of diversity that is emerging in the UK. He argues that Britain can now be characterized by 'super-diversity, a notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced' (Vertovec 2006: 1). Post-1945 migration to Britain was state-led and intended primarily to fill labour market gaps by drawing large groups from South Asian and African-Caribbean communities in the former colonies of the Commonwealth. But recent demographic changes and shifting patterns of migration have produced a much more complex situation, as smaller groups of people from a wider range of countries move away from their country of origin for a variety of reasons.

The phenomenon of super-diversity involves complex combinations of country of origin, channel or route of migration, age and gender profile, legal status (and therefore legal rights), migrants' human capital (such as qualifications and skills), access to employment (linked to legal status), locality, transnationalism (connections to people and places around the world) and the response of authorities, service providers and local residents to migrant groups (Vertovec 2006: 31). This is illustrated in the example of Somalis living in the UK. Some Somalis are British citizens, while others are 'refugees, asylum-seekers, persons granted exceptional leave to remain, undocumented migrants, and people granted refugee status in another country but who subsequently moved to Britain' (ibid.: 18). These varied routes into Britain and the different legal statuses and associated rights shape access to employment, public services, housing, place of residence and much more. Super-diversity involves not simply diverse experiences *between* different ethnic groups; it also alerts us to the diversity *within* particular ethnic groups. The task for sociologists will be to find ways of exploring, writing about and understanding the interplay of the many

variables which characterize this emerging diversity of lifestyles and experiences.

Large cities such as London (seen here) have been characterized today as super-diverse in terms of their ethnic mix.

Any attempt to discuss the social world and its diversity necessarily has to make distinctions and, in doing so, carves up reality into meaningful categories. Sociologists as well as government statisticians cannot avoid this. In the case of ethnic diversity, we have to acknowledge the limitations of these categories to capture the reality of people's experience and try not to confuse our categories with existing, cohesive social groups. To do so would be to fall into the trap of 'groupism' highlighted by Brubaker (2006) above. Increasingly, sociologists recognize that the differential experiences of ethnic groups that are more and more varied and the diversity within them make broad generalizations less valid. An awareness of such problems is at least a first step towards a better understanding of how the concepts of race and ethnicity are deployed, understood and experienced today.

Models of ethnic integration

How can ethnic diversity be accommodated and the possibility of ethnic conflict averted? What should the relationship between minority ethnic groups and the majority population be? There are three primary models of ethnic integration that have been adopted by multi-ethnic societies in relation to these challenges: assimilation, the 'melting pot' and, finally, cultural pluralism or multiculturalism. It is important to realize that these three models are ideal types and are not easy to achieve in practice.

Max Weber's use of 'ideal types' is discussed in chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?'.

The first model is assimilation, meaning that immigrants abandon their original customs and practices and mould their behaviour to the values and norms of the majority. An assimilationist approach demands that immigrants change their language, dress, lifestyles and cultural outlooks as part of integrating into a new social order. In the United States, generations of immigrants were subjected to pressure to become 'assimilated' in this way, and many of their children became more or less completely 'American' as a result. Of course, even if minorities try to assimilate, many are unable to do so if they are racialized or if their attempts are rebuffed – whether it be in employment or dating or any other context.

A second model is that of the melting pot. Rather than the traditions of the immigrants being dissolved in favour of those dominant among the pre-existing population, they become blended to form new, evolving cultural patterns. The USA has been seen as exhibiting the pattern associated with the idea of a melting pot. Not only are differing cultural values and norms 'brought in' to a society from the outside, but diversity is created as ethnic groups adapt to the wider social environments in which they find themselves. One often-cited literal example of a melting-pot culture is the dish chicken tikka masala, said

to have been invented by Bangladeshi chefs in Indian restaurants in the UK. Chicken tikka is an Indian dish, but the masala sauce was an improvised addition. In 2001, it was described by the then foreign secretary as a 'British national dish'.

Many have thought that the melting-pot model is the most desirable form of ethnic integration. Traditions and customs of immigrant populations are not abandoned but contribute to and shape a constantly transforming social milieu. Hybrid forms of cuisine, fashion, music and architecture are manifestations of the melting-pot approach. To a limited degree, this model is an accurate expression of aspects of American cultural development. Although the 'Anglo' culture has remained the pre-eminent one, its character in some part reflects the impact of the many different groups that now compose the American population.

The third model is cultural pluralism, in which ethnic cultures are given full validity to exist separately yet participate in the larger society's economic and political life. A recent and important outgrowth of pluralism is multiculturalism, which refers to state policies that encourage cultural or ethnic groups to live in harmony with one another. The United States and other Western countries are pluralistic in many senses, but ethnic differences have for the most part been associated with inequalities rather than with equal but independent membership in the national community. It does seem at least possible to create a society in which ethnic groups are distinct but equal, as is demonstrated by Switzerland, where French, German and Italian groups coexist in the same society.

One advocate of multiculturalism, the political scientist Bhikhu Parekh (2000: 67), puts forward its central argument:

> The cultural identity of some groups ('minorities') should not have to be confined to the private sphere while the language, culture and religion of others ('the majority') enjoy a public monopoly and are treated as the norm. For a lack of public recognition is damaging to people's self-esteem and is not conducive to encouraging the full participation of everyone in the public sphere.

Parekh argues that there are three 'insights' in multicultural thinking. First, human beings are embedded within a culturally structured world, which provides them with a system of meanings. And, though individuals are not determined entirely by their cultures, they are 'deeply shaped' by them. Second, cultures contain visions of what constitutes 'a good life'. But, if they are not to stagnate or become irrelevant, each culture needs other, different cultures with alternative visions, which encourages critical reflection and the expansion of horizons. Finally, cultures are not monolithic but internally diverse, with continuing debates between different traditions. The crucial task for multi-cultural societies in the twenty-first century, according to Parekh (ibid.: 78), is 'the need to find ways of reconciling the legitimate demands of unity and diversity, of achieving political unity without cultural uniformity, and cultivating among its citizens both a common sense of belonging and a willingness to respect and cherish deep cultural differences.'

Amartya Sen argues against a 'solitarist approach' to understanding human identities. Solitarism, such as that found in some religious and civilizationist approaches, perceives a person's national, civilizational or religious adherence to be their primary form of identity and places them into just one main 'identity group'. However, Sen (2007: xii) claims that this approach generates much mutual misunderstanding. In reality, we see ourselves and each other as belonging to a variety of identity groups and have little problem doing so:

> The same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, with African ancestry, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a schoolteacher, a novelist, a feminist, a heterosexual, a believer in gay and lesbian rights, a theater lover, an environmental activist, a tennis fan, a jazz musician, and someone who is deeply committed to the view that there are intelligent beings in outer space with whom it is extremely urgent to talk (preferably in English). Each of these collectivities, to all of which this person simultaneously belongs, gives her a particular identity. None of them can be taken to be the person's only identity or singular membership category.

The assumption of one unique or primordial identity that dominates all others breeds mistrust and often violence. Solitarist identities which generate an 'illusion of destiny' – such as that of a national people's unique identity that gives them an ancient right to hold territory – come into conflict. Sen maintains that a more widespread recognition of the plurality of individual identities holds out the hope of a genuine multiculturalism, set against the divisiveness of a model based on the imposition of singular identities.

Critics of multiculturalism raise concerns about the potential for ethnic segregation if states enable, for example, separate schooling and curricula. Some countries, including France, Germany and Denmark, have drawn back from recognizing multiculturalism as official policy, and there has been something of a populist and nationalist backlash in sections of most European societies. For example, opinion polling following the UK's EU referendum in 2016 found that around 81 per cent of those who saw multiculturalism as a force for ill also voted to leave the EU, as did 80 per cent of those who saw immigration as a social ill (Ashcroft 2016). In the Netherlands, the Party for Freedom won nine parliamentary seats in 2006 but twenty-four in 2010. Its leader declared that 'More security, less crime, less immigration, less Islam – this is what Holland chose.' In the same year, the German chancellor Angela Merkel said that, when Germany encouraged foreign workers into the country in the early 1960s, it was assumed 'they won't stay and that they will have disappeared again one day. That's not the reality.' Multiculturalism in Germany, she said, had failed.

We should remember that all of these societies are already 'multi-cultural', in the sense that they are constituted by a diversity of ethnic groups and cultures. Current debates are really concerned with 'political multiculturalism' – that is, whether facilitating and encouraging ethnic and cultural diversity should be official state policy. In many developed societies, the community leaders of most minority ethnic groups have emphasized the path of cultural pluralism, though achieving 'distinct but equal' status seems a distant option at present. Minority ethnic groups are still perceived by ethnic majorities as a threat – to their jobs, to their safety and to their 'national culture' – and the scapegoating of minority ethnic groups is a persistent tendency.

This is increasingly likely in societies characterized by economic recession and austerity plans alongside tensions and anxieties about immigration and national identities.

However, many people confuse multiculturalism with *cultural diversity* – they talk about living in a 'multicultural society' when, in reality, they mean that society is made up of people from different ethnic backgrounds. Others think that multiculturalism is about separatism. According to this view, we simply have to accept that there are many different cultures across the world and within particular societies, and that none can have primacy over others. This naïvely implies leaving all social groups to follow whatever norms they like, regardless of the consequences for the wider society.

More 'sophisticated' versions of multiculturalism are concerned with social solidarity, not, as critics claim, with separateness, where different groups have equality of status and diversity should be openly respected (Giddens 2006: 123–4; Rattansi 2011: 57). But equality of status does not mean the uncritical acceptance of all practices. Charles Taylor (1992) argues that all people in society have an equal right to respect, but if they have equal rights they also have responsibilities, including a fundamental responsibility to obey the law. Thus, although the issues are not clear-cut, it is the fostering of open dialogue that is an important element of multiculturalism.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> If cultural diversity is inevitable in a globalizing world, why do 'solitarist' identities retain their power? In particular, can you see any evidence of national identities declining?

Ethnic conflict

Ethnic diversity can greatly enrich societies. Multi-ethnic societies are often vibrant and dynamic places, strengthened by the varied contributions of their inhabitants. But they can also be fragile, especially in the face of internal upheaval or external threat. Differing linguistic, religious and cultural backgrounds can become fault-lines for

open antagonism. Sometimes societies with long histories of ethnic tolerance and integration can rapidly become engulfed in ethnic conflict – hostilities between different ethnic groups or communities.

This was the case in the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, a region renowned for its rich multi-ethnic heritage. Centuries of migration and the rule of successive empires produced a diverse, intermixed population composed predominantly of Slavs (such as the Eastern Orthodox Serbs), Croats (Catholic), Muslims and Jews. After 1991, alongside major political and social transformations following the fall of communism, deadly conflicts broke out between ethnic groups in several areas of the former Yugoslavia.

The conflict in former Yugoslavia involved attempts at ethnic cleansing – the creation of ethnically homogeneous areas through the mass expulsion of other ethnic populations. A recent example of ethnic cleansing, which according to the United Nations also shows 'genocidal intent', is the campaign by security forces in Myanmar against the Rohingya Muslim minority in the west of the country. Although the Rohingya were already subject to restrictions on their citizenship, including different rules on marriage, employment, education and freedom of movement, the military campaign (ostensibly against a Rohingya militant group) began in 2017, using murder, arson, rape and sexual assault against civilians, forcing an estimated 900,000 Rohingya people to flee into neighbouring Bangladesh by the end of January 2020 (Council on Foreign Relations 2020c). Some reports suggest that deserted villages have also been cleared for new developments, thus preventing families from returning, a key aspect of ethnic cleansing attacks.

Global society 8.3 Genocide in Rwanda

Rwanda is a relatively small country in central Africa with a population of around 12 million people. In normal times it is a peaceable, safe place. However, between 6 April and mid-July 1994, Rwanda and its capital, Kigali, were engulfed by a wave of ethnic conflict that led to the deaths of an estimated 800,000 people. The vast majority of those killed were Tutsis, and the perpetrators were Hutus. Lowery and Spalding (2017: 6) point to the failure of the United Nations, and the international community more generally, to prevent or stop the genocidal violence: 'The butchery was fast and cruel – often occurring with clubs or machetes – and executed under the eyes of UN peacekeeping force. Worldwide, politicians were fully aware of the cruelties in Rwanda, but they failed to help. And when they finally acted, it was too late.' How had such catastrophic ethnic hatred and violence taken hold in Rwanda?

In the distant past the country was settled by people who owned and farmed cattle. Over time, some groups gathered who owned large numbers of cattle and came to be known as Tutsis, with the majority then called Hutus. Tutsis were initially lighter-skinned than Hutus, though over time this difference was largely eliminated through intermarriage. Tutsis and Hutus were also culturally similar, with a shared language, religion and traditions. Disagreements and ethnic tensions between Hutus and Tutsis were not uncommon, but it was European colonialism that led directly to the more distinct separation between the two groups.

During the Rwandan genocide, 5,000 people were massacred in the Catholic church at Ntarama. Today, the church is part of a memorial centre.

The first colonists in Rwanda were Germans, though Germany lost control of the country during the First World War. Belgium became the colonial power in 1916 and began to differentiate more clearly between Tutsis and Hutus, handing Tutsis positions of power, as their physical features more closely resembled white 'Caucasians'. The colonial administration required all Rwandans to register themselves as Hutu, Tutsi or Twa (an indigenous group of around 1 per cent of the population), and ethnic identity cards were introduced. Tutsis were favoured for the well-paid work and enjoyed a better standard of education than the majority Hutus, a situation that resulted in resentment, unrest and, eventually, riots in 1959, in which at least 20,000 Tutsis were killed; others left for neighbouring countries. Rwanda gained independence from Belgian rule in 1962 and Hutus took control (Lowery and Spalding 2017: 9–10).

By 1990 Rwanda's economic position was worsening. Tutsis living in Uganda, along with some moderate Hutus, formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), whose aim was to overthrow the Rwandan government and implement the right for Tutsis to return to their homeland. The RPF launched an invasion of Rwanda in 1990, and President Habyarimana accused Rwandan Tutsis of collaborating with this 'external' enemy. Fighting continued for the next three years, before a peace agreement was finally signed in 1993. But in April 1994 the president's plane was shot down, triggering an immediate campaign of violence against Tutsis, who were suspected of the killing (BBC News 2019f).

The presidential guard in Kigali began a campaign of violence in which political opponents, Tutsis and moderate Hutus were all targeted. A militia group – the Interahamwe ('those who attack together') – was formed and some 30,000 people recruited. Hutus were encouraged to participate in the killing of Tutsis, and some were promised land or payment to do so (BBC 2011). After 100 days of systematic, targeted violence, the RPF, with help from the Ugandan army, took back control of Kigali and claimed 'victory'. Fearing retribution, some 2 million Hutus left Rwanda for the Democratic Republic of Congo (then called Zaire).

A new multi-ethnic Rwandan government was formed on 19 July 1994, and in 2002 an international court was established in Tanzania to prosecute the organizers of the violence. Many Hutu former government officials were found guilty of genocide. 12,000 community courts (known as *Gacaca*) were also established, and by 2012 some 1.2 million people had been brought before them in an attempt to achieve justice and promote reconciliation (BBC News 2019f). In Rwanda today it is illegal to discuss ethnicity, ostensibly to avoid stirring up ethnic hatred and conflict.

It has been noted that violent conflicts around the globe are increasingly based on ethnic divisions and that only a tiny proportion of wars now occur between states. The vast majority of conflicts are civil wars with ethnic dimensions. For instance, government-backed Arab militias have been accused of ethnic cleansing in Sudan following an

uprising by some of the black population of the Western Sudanese region of Darfur in 2003. Reprisals by the militia led to at least 70,000 deaths and left around 2 million people homeless. In a world of increasing interdependence and competition, international factors become even more important in shaping ethnic relations, while the effects of 'internal' ethnic conflicts are felt beyond national borders.

Changing forms of warfare are discussed in chapter 21, 'Nations, War and Terrorism'.

[Migration in a global age](#)

Migration may appear to be a phenomenon of the twentieth century, but the process has its roots in the earliest stages of written history. As we saw earlier, the recent 'new migration' has produced an intensified super-diversity, and in some areas, such as Hackney in London or parts of New York, the experience of cultural diversity is so ordinary that people pay it little attention. Wessendorf (2014: 3) notes that 'Commonplace diversity thus results from a saturation of difference whenever people step out of their front door.' The new migration patterns which have helped to transform social life in the last twenty-five years or so are one aspect of the rapidly growing economic, political and cultural ties between countries.

It has been estimated that one in every thirty-three people in the world today is a migrant. In 2012, about 214 million people resided in a country other than where they were born, and the International Organization for Migration (2012) estimated that this number may almost double by 2050, to 405 million, prompting some scholars to label this the 'age of migration' (Castles and Miller 2019 [1993]). In this section we recount the experience of immigration in Britain, which has played a crucial role in the movement of people around the world during the period of both imperialist expansion and the demise of the British Empire.

[Immigration](#), the movement of people into a country to settle, and [emigration](#), the process by which people leave one country to settle in another, combine to produce global migration patterns linking *countries of origin* and *countries of destination*. Migratory movements add to ethnic and cultural diversity in many societies and help to shape demographic, economic and social dynamics. The intensification of global migration since the Second World War, and particularly in more recent decades, has transformed immigration into an important and contentious political issue.

Four models of migration have been used to describe the main global population movements since 1945. The *classic model* applied

historically to countries such as Canada, the United States and Australia, which have developed as 'nations of immigrants'. In such cases, immigration has been largely encouraged and the promise of citizenship has been extended to newcomers, although restrictions and quotas help to limit the annual intake. The *colonial model*, pursued by countries such as France and the United Kingdom, tended to favour immigrants from former colonies over those from other countries. The large number of immigrants to Britain in the years after the Second World War from Commonwealth countries, such as India or Jamaica, reflected this tendency.

Countries such as Germany, Switzerland and Belgium have followed a third policy – the *guest workers model*. Under such a scheme, immigrants are admitted into the country on a temporary basis, often to fulfil demands within the labour market, but they do not receive citizenship rights even after long periods of settlement. Finally, *unauthorized forms* of immigration are becoming increasingly common. Immigrants who are able to gain entry into a country either secretly or under a 'non-immigration' pretence are often able to live outside the realm of official society. Examples can be seen in the large number of Mexican undocumented immigrants in many Southern US states and in the growing international business of smuggling refugees across national borders.

The spread of industrialization dramatically transformed migration patterns. The growth of opportunities for work in urban areas coupled with the decline of household production in the countryside encouraged a trend towards rural–urban migration. Demands within the labour market also gave new impetus to immigration from abroad. In Britain, Irish, Jewish and black communities had existed long before the Industrial Revolution, but the surge of new opportunities altered the scale and scope of international immigration. New waves of Dutch, Chinese, Irish and black immigrants transformed British society.

A large wave of immigration to Britain occurred in the 1930s when the Nazi persecutions sent a generation of European Jews fleeing westwards to safety. It has been estimated that some 60,000 Jews settled in the UK between 1933 and 1939, but the real figure may well have been higher. In the same period, around 80,000 refugees arrived

from Central Europe and a further 70,000 entered during the war itself. By May 1945, Europe faced an unprecedented refugee problem: millions of people had become refugees.

Following the Second World War, Britain experienced immigration on a large scale as people from Commonwealth countries were encouraged and facilitated to come to the UK, which had a marked shortage of labour. In addition to rebuilding the country and economy following the destruction of the war, industrial expansion provided British workers with unprecedented mobility, creating a need for labour in unskilled and manual positions. Government, influenced by ideas of Britain's imperial heritage, encouraged people from the West Indies, India, Pakistan and other former African colonies to settle in the UK. The 1948 British Nationality Act granted favourable immigration rights to citizens of Commonwealth countries.

With each wave of immigration, the religious make-up of the country also changed. British cities, in particular, are now multi-ethnic and religiously diverse. In the nineteenth century, immigrants from Ireland swelled the number of Catholics in cities such as Liverpool and Glasgow, where many settled. In the post-war period, large-scale immigration from Asia increased the number of Muslims, many from the largely Muslim countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh, and Hindus and Sikhs, mainly from India. Immigration brought new questions about what it means to be British.

Religious diversity is discussed in more detail in chapter 18, 'Religion'.

Migration and the decline of empire: Britain since the 1960s

The 1960s marked the start of a gradual rolling back of the idea that inhabitants of the British Empire had the right to settle in Britain and claim citizenship. Although changing labour markets played a role in the new restrictions, they were also the response to a backlash against immigrants by groups of white Britons. In particular, working people living in poorer areas, to which the new immigrants gravitated for their work, were sensitive to the 'disruption' to their own lives. Attitudes to the newcomers were often hostile. The 1958 'Notting Hill riots', in which white residents attacked black immigrants, were testament to the existence of racist attitudes.

The issue of urban unrest and 'riots' is discussed in [chapter 13](#), 'Cities and Urban Life'.

Many anti-racist campaigners have argued that British immigration policy is racist and discriminatory against non-white groups. Since the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, a series of legislative measures have been passed, gradually restricting entry and settlement rights for non-whites, while protecting the ability of whites to enter Britain relatively freely. For example, among citizens of Commonwealth states, immigration laws discriminated against the predominantly non-white 'New Commonwealth' states, while preserving the rights of mainly white immigrants from 'old Commonwealth' countries such as Canada and Australia. The British Nationality Act of 1981 separated 'British citizenship' from citizenship of British dependent territories. Legislation introduced in 1988 and 1996 increased these restrictions even further.

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 set requirements for people wanting British citizenship, including a basic knowledge of life in the UK, citizenship ceremonies and a pledge of allegiance. In 2008, a new pointsbased immigration system was introduced, in which points were awarded for workplace skills, age, educational qualifications and

UK experience. The aim was to manage migration better and link migration to the needs of the economy. The government imposed a temporary cap on immigration from outside the European Union in 2010, while very wealthy individuals and those of 'exceptional talent' (such as some sports stars) were still allowed to enter more freely.

The government's intention was to reduce net immigration to the UK to 'tens of thousands' rather than 'hundreds of thousands', a policy that some argue led directly to the persecution of British citizens in the Windrush scandal, discussed in ['Using your sociological imagination' 8.2](). However, business organizations expressed concerns that reducing the number of skilled workers could damage the economy, while human rights groups have opposed proposals to tighten the rules on immigration for family members. In practice, the target was not met and, when the government left office in 2015, net long-term immigration in the previous year was 318,000, significantly higher than the 2013 figure of 209,000 (ONS 2015b: 1). However, since the 2016 EU referendum, which returned a vote to leave the EU, net migration from European countries fell sharply, and by 2018 net migration stood at 258,000 (Sumption and Vergas-Silva 2019).

Migrants from the Commonwealth who came to the UK after the Second World War to help to fill labour shortages often faced suspicion, racism and discrimination.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

8.2 The Windrush scandal

After the Second World War the UK economy looked to address labour shortages in some sectors by encouraging and facilitating immigration from Caribbean countries. The 1948 British Nationality Act granted citizenship status and the right to settle in the UK to those born in British colonies. The policy was successful, and around 500,000 people moved to the UK between 1948 and 1970. These came to be known as the 'Windrush generation', named after one of the first ships that brought the new immigrants into the country, the *Empire Windrush*. As the right to remain was automatic, no documentary evidence was required, and people lived and worked according to their status as British citizens.

Fast forward to 2018, and journalists reported that many older people from Commonwealth countries had been receiving letters from the Home Office insisting that, unless they could prove they had been continuously resident in the UK since 1973, they were under threat of the removal of their rights to medical care and could be deported. Those who arrived before 1973 were particularly at risk, as they had not needed any specific documentation to prove their citizenship rights. A change in government policy aimed at radically reducing immigration levels by creating a 'hostile environment' which, in practice, scapegoated all immigrants. The policy set targets for the removal of illegal immigrants and led directly to legally settled British citizens being placed under suspicion. The government admitted that it knew of eighty-three British citizens who were wrongfully deported after the introduction of the new policy, but the number could be as large as 164 (Agerholm 2018).

The consequences for individuals can be illustrated by the case of Paulette Wilson, described below by a journalist for *The Guardian,*

Amelia Gentleman (2018), one of the first to report on the consequences and scale of this issue.

> The 61-year-old moved to the UK in 1968 when she was 10 and has never left. Because she had never applied for a British passport and had no papers proving she had a right to be in the UK, she was classified as an illegal immigrant. Last October, she was sent to the immigration removal centre at Yarl's Wood in Bedford for a week, and then taken to Heathrow before deportation to Jamaica, a country she had not visited for 50 years and where she has no surviving relatives. The former cook, who used to serve food to MPs in the House of Commons and has 34 years of national insurance contributions, was horrified at the prospect of being separated from her daughter and granddaughter. A lastminute intervention from her MP and a local charity prevented her removal. After Guardian publicity she has since been given a biometric card, proving she is in the UK legally, but she will have to reapply in 2024 and is already worried about the process. She has had no apology from the Home Office.

Two parliamentary reports in mid-2018 criticized the Home Office for its failings, arguing that people's human rights had been abused. They also blamed the hostile environment policy and called for migration targets to be scrapped. The government promised it would compensate victims of the policy who had lost their jobs and earnings or been forced into debt, and the cost of this may eventually total up to £570 million. However, making a claim proved to be a lengthy and confusing process, and compensation was limited to one year's earnings. Many people say they have lost much more than that and have not been compensated adequately for their real losses.

Gentleman (2019) argues that 'The scandal emerged as the latest chapter in a long, guilty history of colonial occupation and exploitation … It was hard to avoid the feeling that officials dismissed them as a group of people who didn't matter, a group who, if nothing else were sufficiently marginalised that they were

unlikely to complain.' As of early 2020, the process of compensating victims still has a long way to go.

In a similar way, many European countries have reduced the possibility for asylum-seekers to gain entry. To be granted asylum, individuals must claim that being forced to leave the country would break obligations that the government has under the United Nations Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees (1951). Since 1991, there have been more stringent checks on people claiming refugee status, including fingerprinting, reduced access to free legal advice, and the doubling of fines levied on airlines which bring in passengers not holding valid visas. As more measures were introduced, an increasing number of refusals resulted in a larger number of asylum-seekers being held in detention centres for long periods of time.

Despite periodic spikes of increased interest, immigration and race relations barely registered in UK surveys until around 1993, when a steadily rising trend began (Duffy and Frere-Smith 2014). Of course, key events can also affect public opinion, as with the so-called race riots in parts of the UK. Since al-Qaeda's attacks on the USA in September 2001, there has been a shift towards rising concerns about race and ethnicity, not just in Britain but across most of the developed world.

As may be seen in figure 8.4, as annual net migration to the UK increases, opinion polls show migration rising to the top of 'issues of concern'. Yet across the other countries of the EU there appears to be no such correlation, which points to the importance of the national social and political context in generating concerns about particular issues. As opportunities for migrants to enter Britain were cut off, there was a

sharp rise in the number of people seeking asylum. Depictions of 'bogus' asylum-seekers 'swamping' the UK served to create a distorted image of immigration and asylum. The coordinated terrorist suicide bombings in London on 7 July 2005, which killed fifty-two civilians and injured 700 others, led to headlines in British newspapers, suggesting a direct link between terrorism and asylum-seekers. This sensationalist reporting proved to be entirely inaccurate.

In addition, the emergence and electoral successes of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), which focused on the negative aspects of EU membership and problems supposedly 'caused' by high levels of immigration, provided a lens through which migration statistics were interpreted. Controlling inward migration was certainly a key issue in the successful Vote Leave campaign during the 2016 EU referendum. Across Europe, concerns about race and immigration have also been rising, though with many national differences.
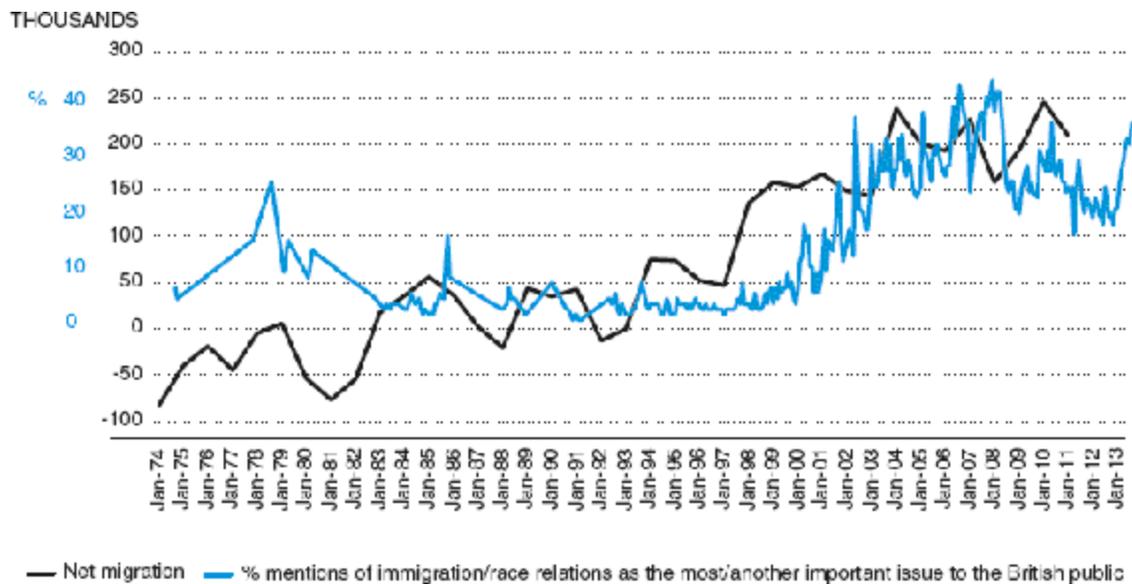
Figure 8.4 Immigration as an important issue, by UK net migration, 1974–2013

Source: Duffy and Frere-Smith (2014: 8).

Given the 2008 financial crisis, the 2009 global recession and post-recession austerity programmes across the countries of the developed world, it is unsurprising that immigration has stayed at the forefront of media commentary and political debate. In testing economic periods,

there is a tendency to apportion blame, which often means that visible minority ethnic groups become convenient scapegoats. In such times, rational analysis of the pros and cons of immigration often struggle to be heard. Nonetheless, conducting such rational analyses as the basis for policy-making is fundamental to social scientific work and remains an important counterweight to some of the more hysterical media commentary.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Given the increasing mobility of the global age, is rising concern about immigration inevitable in the developed countries? Does this also mean increasing success for anti-immigration political parties?

Migration and the European Union

Most European countries were profoundly transformed by migration during the twentieth century. Large-scale migration took place in Europe during the two decades after the Second World War, with the Mediterranean countries providing the nations in the North and West with cheap labour. Migrants moving from areas such as Turkey, North Africa, Greece and southern Spain and Italy were, for a period, actively encouraged by host countries facing acute shortages of labour. Switzerland, Germany, Belgium and Sweden all have considerable populations of migrant workers. At the same time, former colonial powers experienced an influx of migrants from their former colonies, and this applied primarily to France (Algerians) and the Netherlands (Indonesians), as well as the UK.

Since the end of Eastern European communism, the EU has witnessed new migration marked by two main events. First, the opening of borders between East and West led to the migration of several million people into EU countries between 1989 and 1994. Second, war and ethnic strife in the former Yugoslavia resulted in a surge of approximately 5 million refugees into other regions of Europe (Koser and Lutz 1998). The geographical patterns of European migration have also shifted, with the lines between countries of origin and countries of

destination becoming increasingly blurred. Countries in Southern and Central Europe have become destinations for many migrants, a notable departure from earlier immigration trends. As part of the move towards European integration, many of the earlier barriers to the free movement of commodities, capital and employees have been removed. This has led to a dramatic increase in regional migration, as EU citizens have the right to work in any other EU country.

Figure 8.5 The Schengen area as at February 2020

Source: European Commission.

As the process of European integration continues, a number of countries dissolved internal border controls with neighbouring states as part of the Schengen agreement, which came into force in 1995. By 2001, the agreement had been implemented by twenty-five countries, and their external borders are only monitored, as they allow free entry from neighbouring member states (see figure 8.5). This reconfiguration of European border controls has had an enormous impact on illegal immigration into the EU and cross-border crime. Unauthorized immigrants able to gain access to a Schengen state can move unimpeded throughout the entire Schengen area.

Migration from outside the EU has become one of the most pressing issues for a number of European states. Many of the key issues were thrown into sharp relief in 2014–15, when thousands of people arrived in Southern Europe having crossed by boat from Libya. Some migrants were escaping conflicts in Syria, Iraq and parts of Africa, while many others were trying to improve their life chances. The involvement of human trafficking groups profiting from such desperate movements of people around the world only added to the controversy. The EU's border management agency, Frontex, estimated that around 63,000 migrants arrived in Greece and 62,000 in Italy, while some 10,000 were on the Hungary–Serbia border. These numbers represented almost a 150 per cent increase from 2013 (BBC News 2015a).

Many migrants die at sea while trying to make the Mediterranean crossing to Europe from Libya. In 2014 over 3,000 people lost their lives in this way, and in just the first four months of 2015 more than 1,700 people were killed, often when their hugely overcrowded boats capsized and sank at sea. A majority had travelled from Syria and some of the poorest countries of sub-Saharan Africa, including Mali, Eritrea, Sudan, Gambia, Senegal and Somalia, plus a smaller number of Palestinians (Malakooti and Davin 2015). Between 2013 and 2019, best estimates suggest that some 19,000 migrants died following the Mediterranean route into Europe (InfoMigrants 2019), while the overall total may be more than 34,000 (McIntyre and Rice-Oxley 2019).

The collapse of national government in Libya after 2011 allowed human traffickers to exploit the thousands of people escaping conflict in Syria and persecution or hardship in parts of Africa. In 2014–15, Italy and Greece were the main entry points.

Figure 8.6 Global migrations, 1945–73

Source: Castles and Miller (1993: 67).

Figure 8.7 Global migrations, 1973–1990

Source: Castles and Miller (1993: 67).

EU rules state that those seeking asylum should be fingerprinted and make their application in the first EU country they enter. That would mean countries such as Greece and Italy shouldering the entire administrative burden as well as taking in the large numbers involved. In June 2015 the European Commission proposed a quota system to distribute around 40,000 of the new migrants to other EU countries and set out a plan to break up the human traffickers' networks. Agreement proved difficult on both aspects. Some EU countries objected to mandatory migration quotas, while UN authorization for operations in Libya and its territorial waters brought objections from Russia. The crisis illustrates the truly global nature of migration and mobility but also the lack of global coordination by authorities trying to manage the situation. Irregular mass movements of humanity may become more frequent as internal conflicts and gross global inequalities continue.

Globalization and migration

European expansion many centuries ago initiated large-scale movement of populations, which formed the basis of many of the world's multi-ethnic societies today. Since these initial waves of global migration, human populations have continued to interact and mix in ways that have fundamentally shaped their ethnic composition. In this section we shall consider concepts related to global migration patterns.

Classic studies 8.2 Patterns of mobility in the new age of migration

The research problem

People have long moved around the world for better job prospects or to flee persecution. But today patterns of migration have changed as people take advantage of global transport and travel systems and new opportunities for tourism. How will global migration affect the composition and solidarities within the societies of the twenty-first century? Stephen Castles and Mark Miller's original book (1993) on the subject was into its sixth edition by 2019, suggesting that the authors' analysis successfully framed and redefined the field of migration studies. In short, their analysis of 'the new migration' has become a modern classic.

Castles and Miller's explanation

Castles and Miller acknowledge that international migration is certainly not new; it has existed from the earliest times. What has changed today, though, is the sheer size, speed and scope of migration, all of which have the potential to transform societies. Examining recent trends in global migration patterns, the authors identify four tendencies, which they claim will characterize migration in the coming years.

First there is a tendency towards the *acceleration* of migration across borders as people move in greater numbers than ever before. Second is the tendency towards *diversification*. Most countries now receive immigrants from many different places with a variety of motivations, in contrast with earlier times when particular forms of immigration, such as labour immigration or refugees fleeing persecution, were predominant. Third, there is a tendency towards *globalization*. Migration has become global in character, involving a larger number of countries as both 'senders' and 'recipients' of migrants. Finally, there is a tendency towards the *feminization* of migration. A growing number of migrants are women, making

contemporary migration much less male-dominated than in previous times.

Taking these together, Castles and Miller argue that, in the 'new age of migration', there will be much more movement of people, many of them women, and particular countries will experience a more diverse range of immigrant groups. Migration is also very likely to become normalized as a central feature of the world in which we live; people, governments and international bodies (such as the United Nations) will have to find new ways of managing it.

Critical points

Some have suggested that the analysis presented by Castles and Miller remains quite conventional and does not do enough to link with emerging and potentially overlapping fields, such as the new studies of mobilities (see Sheller and Urry 2004; Larsen et al. 2006). Others argue that their book is centred on states and their fate in the age of mass migration rather than moving beyond states to explore large urban regions.

Contemporary significance

Castles and Miller have made a significant contribution to the new migration studies by effectively showing how globalization influences patterns of migration and how migration has much greater potential to reshape societies. They have helped, too, to reshape the field of migration studies by adopting a more comparative perspective than usual and exploring migration from the developed to the developing countries as well as in the other direction. They also manage to link migration patterns to theories of globalization, thus bringing the study of migration into the mainstream of sociology.

Early theories of migration focused on so-called push and pull factors. 'Push factors' referred to dynamics within a country of origin which forced people to emigrate, such as war, famine, political oppression or population pressures. 'Pull factors', by contrast, were those features of destination countries which attracted immigrants: prosperous labour markets, better overall living conditions and lower population density, for example, could 'pull' immigrants from other regions.

Push and pull theories have been criticized for offering overly simplistic explanations of a complex and multifaceted process. Instead, scholars of migration are increasingly looking at global migration patterns as 'systems' which are produced through interactions between macroand micro-level processes. Macro-level factors refer to overarching issues such as the political situation in an area, the laws and regulations controlling immigration and emigration, or changes in the international economy. Micro-level factors, on the other hand, are concerned with the resources, knowledge and understandings that the migrant populations themselves possess.

The intersection of macro and micro processes can be seen in the case of Germany's large Turkish immigrant community. On the macro level are factors such as Germany's economic need for labour, its policy of accepting foreign 'guest workers' and the state of the Turkish economy, which prevents many Turks from earning at the level they would wish. At the micro level are the informal networks and channels of mutual support within the Turkish community in Germany and the strong links to family and friends who have remained in Turkey. Among potential Turkish migrants, knowledge about Germany and 'social capital' – human or community resources that can be drawn on – help to make

Germany one of the most popular destination countries. Supporters of the migration systems approach emphasize that no single factor can explain the process of migration. Rather, each particular migratory movement, like that between Turkey and Germany, is the product of an interaction of macro- and micro-level processes.

Global diasporas

Another way to understand global migration patterns is through the study of diasporas. This refers to the dispersal of an ethnic population from an original homeland into foreign areas, often in a forced manner or under traumatic circumstances. References are often made to the Jewish and African diasporas to describe the way in which these populations have become redistributed across the globe as a result of slavery and genocide. Although members of a diaspora are by definition scattered geographically, they are held together by factors such as shared history, a collective memory of the original homeland, or a common ethnic identity which is nurtured and preserved.

We are probably more familiar with diaspora as the involuntary movement of people resulting from persecution and violence, but Cohen (1997) argues that the dominant meaning has changed over time. Adopting a historical approach to the dispersal of people, Cohen identifies five categories of diaspora. The ancient Greeks used the word to describe the dispersal of populations which resulted from *colonization*. *Victim* diasporas, such as those of the African slave trade, along with Jewish and Armenian population movements, are those in which people suffer forced exile and long to return to their homelands. *Labour* diasporas are typified by the indentured labour of Indian workers during British colonialism. Cohen sees movements of Chinese people to South-East Asia during the creation of a *trading* diaspora as an example of a voluntary movement for the buying and selling of goods, not the result of some traumatic event. *Imperial* diasporas are those where imperialist expansion into new lands takes with it people who subsequently make new lives; the British Empire would be the best-known example. Finally, Cohen makes a case for viewing the movement of people from the Caribbean as an instance of *cultural*

diaspora – 'cemented as much by literature, political ideas, religious convictions, music and lifestyles as by permanent migration' (ibid.).

The Jewish community represents one of the most geographically dispersed populations and is a good example of a global diaspora.

In reality though, as Cohen suggests, these categories are overlapping and diasporas occur for a variety of reasons. For instance, the Atlantic slave trade forcibly moved millions of African people away from their homelands, scattering them across a range of countries, often thousands of miles away. This is categorized as a victim diaspora, but the main reason for this was that slaves were in demand as labourers. And despite the diversity of forms, all diasporas share certain key features. Cohen suggests that they all meet the following criteria:

- a forced or voluntary movement from an original homeland to a new region

- a shared memory about the original homeland, a commitment to its preservation and a belief in the possibility of return

- a strong ethnic identity sustained over time and distance

- a sense of solidarity with members of the same ethnic group living in other areas of the diaspora

- a degree of tension in relation to the host societies

- the potential for valuable and creative contributions to pluralistic host societies.

This typology is a simplification and may be criticized for being imprecise. However, the study remains valuable because it shows how the meaning of diaspora is not static but relates to the ongoing processes of maintaining collective identities and preserving ethnic cultures in the context of a rapid period of globalization.

The concept of a diaspora has been applied to a rapidly expanding number of possible cases, from national groups such as Scottish, Estonian or Iraqi to suggested diasporas of 'fundamentalists' and 'rednecks'. This expansion has led some to argue that, 'If everyone is diasporic, then no one is distinctively so. The term loses its discriminating power – its ability to pick out phenomena, to make distinctions. The universalization of diaspora, paradoxically, means the disappearance of diaspora' (Brubaker 2005: 3). Brubaker proposes that one way to retain the concept in social scientific work is to treat 'diaspora' as a form of practice or a project rather than as an existing 'bounded group'. Doing so would enable researchers to explore the extent to which any diasporic 'project' has support from those said to be its members.

Conclusion

Globalizing processes are profoundly altering the societies in which we live. Many societies have become ethnically diverse for the first time; others find that existing patterns of multiethnicity are being transformed or intensified. Everywhere, individuals are coming into regular contact with people who think differently, look different and live differently from themselves. These interactions are occurring face to face but also through images and information transmitted rapidly online.

Global migration patterns form one element in the broad interest in 'mobilities' in sociological research and theorizing (Sheller and Urry 2004; Urry 2007; Benhabib and Resnik 2009). The mobilities research agenda explores issues of 'movement' across a very wide range of social phenomena, including the physical movement of goods, movements of people across the world, information and monetary transfers in cyberspace, and much more. Urry (2007: 6), a key figure in this field, observes that

> Issues of movement, of too little movement for some or too much for others, or of the wrong sort or at the wrong time, are it seems central to many people's lives and to the many operations of many small and large public, private and non-governmental organizations. From SARS to plane crashes, from airport expansion controversies to SMS texting, from slave trading to global terrorism, from obesity caused by the 'school run' to oil wars in the Middle East, from global warming to slave trading, issues of what I term 'mobility' are centre-stage on many policy and academic agendas. There is we might say a 'mobility' structure of feeling in the air …

For Urry (2000), we need a new type of sociology which goes 'beyond societies' – that is, a sociology which investigates social processes, networks and movement across the boundaries of nation-states and effectively dispenses with the previously foundational concept of (a national) 'society' itself. In some ways, the emerging mobilities

paradigm captures some crucial dynamics of global migration. For example, many migrants today do not simply leave one home to forge a new one in a far-flung location. More easily accessible, faster and relatively cheaper travel means that people can physically revisit their original home or attend family reunions and keep in touch via email, social media and mobile phones (Larsen et al. 2006: 44–5). Emigration, for some, has become much less of a one-way, once-and-for-all movement.

Yet exploring mobilities need not entail a commitment to the thesis that social life is inevitably becoming more and more fluid or liquid, or that movement and mobility are certain to increase in the future. As our discussion of ethnic conflicts over resources and territory, public hostility to increasing immigration into Europe, and opposition to multiculturalism as state policy all suggest, increasing mobilities also generate resistance. It is precisely the growing perception that, to paraphrase Karl Marx, 'all that is solid is melting into air' in an increasingly mobile world that gives rise both to optimistic notions of a global or cosmopolitan citizenship and fears of the loss of national and ethnic identity in the global melting pot. How these opposing views will play out has become less rather than more clear over recent years.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. Why do sociologists refer to 'race' today, even though the concept has no basis in scientific work? Should the concept be abandoned?

2. What was the colonialist Atlantic slave trade? What structural impact did this trade have on the colonial countries and those that were colonized?

3. What is meant by 'ethnicity' in sociological work? In what ways can it be argued that ethnicity is a more useful concept than 'race'?

4. Outline what is meant by minority ethnic groups. In what ways is this concept useful and how might it be criticized?

5. How are new forms of racism different from older forms? What evidence is there that old forms have never gone away and are actually becoming stronger around the world today?

6. Explain what is meant by institutional racism and provide some examples of it in the criminal justice system. How can it be effectively tackled?

7. Describe the three main models of ethnic integration: assimilation, melting pot and cultural pluralism/multiculturalism. Which of the three best fits the UK, the USA, Germany and Australia? What evidence is there of a backlash against multiculturalism and a move away from it on the part of political leaders?

8. Outline some of the main movements of people into the UK which have led to a broader ethnic diversity. Which ethnic groups are still disadvantaged compared to the white population and which groups do as well or better? How can these differences be explained?

9. What are the main global patterns that characterize the 'age of migration'? List some of the social and political consequences of a more fluid and widespread global migration.

10. What are diasporas? Outline the main types and their social consequences.

11. What is meant by the thesis of increasing 'mobilities'? What evidence is there from across the book that in the future there may be less fluidity and mobility than the thesis suggests?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

The production of overtly racist discourses has conventionally been from within organized racist groups and organizations and spread via their activities in society. The mainstreaming of online social media has opened up a potentially global, digital space for the propagation of racist ideas and conspiracy theories involving ethnicity and race. Given the lack of face-to-face contact and the anonymity of chatrooms, internet forums and social media, fake identities and content can be very hard to identify.

The paper below explores some of the fake websites purporting to be maintained by extremist Muslims living in Denmark. Read the piece and address the questions that follow.

Farkas, J., Schou, J., and Neumayer, C. (2018) 'Platformed Antagonism: Racist Discourses on Fake Muslim Facebook Pages', *Critical Discourse Studies*, 15(5): 463–80.

1. Describe the methods, timescale and type of analysis used in this study. What kind of research is this?

2. How did the researchers establish that the sites being studied were, in fact, fake?

3. List the main aspects of the Muslim stereotype which are repeated across all of the sites in the study. Provide some specific examples.

4. What do the authors mean by 'platformed antagonism'? What is novel about this in the dissemination of racist propaganda? Conversely, how do the sites stereotypically present Danes?

5. The authors argue that these fake profiles draw on existing notions of civilized, barbaric and naïve ethnic cultures and people. Provide some specific examples of each from the paper.

⚙ **Thinking it through**

The increasing normality of mobility and migration raises the question of how people's identities are formed in the more fluid or 'liquid' social world today. Read Zygmunt Bauman's (2011) theoretical paper 'Migration and Identities in the Globalized World', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 37(4): 425–35, which discusses how societies hold together in this situation.

In your own words, describe the three stages outlined in the transformation of modern societies. What does Bauman mean by 'gardening' in the first stage? How does he characterize contemporary multiculturalism? Explain how 'continuity' and 'discontinuity' may combine to provide the glue that holds modern societies together. What criticisms might be levelled at Bauman's arguments in this piece?

⭐ <u>Society in the arts</u>

There are many representations of relations between ethnic groups, races and cultures in film and television series, some based directly on real events, others entirely fictional. *District 9* (2009), directed by Neill Blomkamp, is ostensibly a science fiction movie about aliens arriving on Earth and the way they are received by humans. However, as the aliens are housed in the squalor of a makeshift camp in South Africa (District 9), the film calls to mind both apartheid-era segregation and the situation of human migrants and refugees in various sites around the world.

Watch the film and note down all of the relevant parallels between the plight of the aliens and that of real-world migrants and refugees. For example, are there prejudice, discrimination and racism towards the aliens? How is this manifested in the behaviour of the humans? What are the responses of groups of aliens? The story turns on the gradual transformation of one human operative into an alien. Given the way this tale unfolds, what, if anything, is the central message of the film? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using science fiction rather than documentary as a way of presenting issues of migration, segregation and asylum?

Further reading

A good place to start is with Stephen Spencer's (2014) *Race and Ethnicity: Culture, Identity and Representation* (2nd edn, London: Routledge), which covers a lot of ground. An excellent collection of essays is *Understanding 'Race' and Ethnicity* (2019), edited by Sangeeta Chattoo, Karl Atkin, Gary Craig and Ronny Flynn (2nd edn, Bristol: Policy Press). The UK situation is also well served by *Ethnicity, Race and Inequality in the UK: State of the Nation* (2020), edited by Bridget Byrne, Claire Alexander, Omar Khan, James Nazroo and William Shankley (Bristol: Policy Press).

For debates and issues around multiculturalism, see Michael Murphy's (2011) *Multiculturalism: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge). Hein de Haas, Stephen Castles and Mark J. Miller's (2019) *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World* (6th edn, London: Red Globe Press) is a key work on migration which also includes material on climate change. For the slave trade, Jeremy Black's (2011) *Slavery: A New Global History* (London: Constable & Robinson) is very good.

Theories of Race and Racism (2009), edited by Les Back and John Solomos (2nd edn, London: Routledge), is an excellent collection, while Nasar Meer's (2014) *Key Concepts in Race and Ethnicity* (London: Sage) is a comprehensive text that goes well beyond this chapter.

For a collection of original readings on social inequalities, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* **(4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).**

@ **Internet links**

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

CRER – the Centre for Research in Ethnic Relations at the University of Warwick, UK – archived material on varied subjects:
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/crer

FRA – the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights – themes include minorities, racism and xenophobia, Roma and travellers:
https://fra.europa.eu/en

The Runnymede Trust – an independent UK race equality think tank with many useful reports:
www.runnymedetrust.org/

UNHCR – the United Nations Refugee Agency – news about and resources on refugees:
www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home

IRR – the Institute of Race Relations, UK – much research and library material:
www.irr.org.uk/

The Migration Observatory, University of Oxford, UK – news and resources on migration issues:
www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/

DARE – Democracy and Human Rights Education in Europe, launched in Antwerp, 2003 – promoting citizen participation across Europe:
https://dare-network.eu/

CHAPTER 9

STRATIFICATION AND SOCIAL CLASS

CONTENTS

Charlotte's family enjoyed a high income and both of her parents were graduates; she struggled when starting school but with her parents' help, she managed to improve her maths and by the age of ten was at the top of her set. She attended a private secondary school and went on to attain a degree. Her predicted probability of being in the top earnings group is 73 per cent.

Stephen's parents had a very low income and had left school without qualifications. He had little interest in school work, he didn't like tests and he didn't see the point of doing homework as he never did well in

class. He went to the local secondary modern after failing his 11+ and left school without any qualifications. His predicted probability of being in the top earnings group is 7 per cent.

On the face if it there is nothing to see here. Charlotte worked hard, had attentive parents and did well in school, thereby opening up opportunities to achieve a high income as an adult. On the other hand, Stephen was lazy, had no interest in education and got his just desserts, making it unlikely that he will be a high earner in adult life. What is there to interest sociologists in such stories of individual differences?

These brief, fictional vignettes are part of a study for the UK's Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (McKnight 2015: 36–7). This statistical analysis looked at a cohort of British children born in 1970, seeking to discover which factors made it more likely that some of them would be in the highest earning groups at the age of forty-two. Both Charlotte and Stephen were in fact 'low attainers' in cognitive skills assessments at the age of five, but their very different family backgrounds, types of schooling and educational experience played a key part in their future life chances. McKnight's study found that, for low-attaining children, there was a clear social gradient in the probability of gaining a top job and earning a high income. Factors which made financial success more likely included parental education, a private or grammar school education, early skills in maths alongside emotional control, and gaining a degree-level qualification.

The study found that more advantaged families are able to protect their low-attaining children from slipping down the social hierarchy. Conversely, where children from less advantaged families were in the high attainers' group at the age of five, they were much less likely to turn this early success into lucrative careers. In short, wealthier families are able to 'hoard' educational opportunities via grammar school places and by taking full advantage of choice in the state sector. The varied parental interventions of wealthier families create an effective glass floor that prevents their children falling into low-earning social groups in adulthood regardless of their early cognitive abilities (Reeves and Howard 2013). What appear to be tales of success or woe rooted in individual characters or personal commitment cannot be

separated from patterns of advantage and disadvantage in the wider society.

Mike Cannon-Brookes and Scott Farquhar met at university in Sydney and founded a software company, Atlassian, in 2002. The highly successful business has made them both billionaires who regularly appear in Australia's rich list.

It can be difficult to accept this conclusion when we are faced with examples of spectacular successes like that of the Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg, whose talent for computer programming and business acumen made him a billionaire at the age of twenty-three with a personal wealth of more than $33 billion in 2015 (*Forbes* 2015). Indeed, capitalist economies reward such entrepreneurship, offering the idea that anyone might achieve success whatever their family background or place of birth.

Yet a large body of sociological research over many years shows that societies are patterned or *stratified* and that the individual's position in that system significantly shapes their life chances. For example, in Britain, the chances of someone from a working-class background making it into high-status jobs and positions of power are slim: 'In every single sphere of British influence, the upper echelons of power in

2013 are held overwhelmingly by the privately educated or the affluent middle class.' This is the view of Sir John Major, a former Conservative prime minister (cited in Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2014: 6). This study found that, although just 7 per cent of British people attend private schools, 71 per cent of senior judges, 62 per cent of senior armed forces officers, 50 per cent of the House of Lords, 44 per cent of the *Sunday Times* rich list, and 36 per cent of the government's cabinet were educated in such schools. Similarly, less than 1 per cent of people attend Oxford or Cambridge University ('Oxbridge'), yet, in 2014, 75 per cent of senior judges, 59 per cent of the cabinet, 50 per cent of diplomats, and 38 per cent of the House of Lords did so (ibid.: 10).

For sociologists, this regularly reproduced pattern raises more questions. Are life chances different again for women, disabled people or minority ethnic groups? How do the various social inequalities within society intersect and what are the outcomes for individuals?

Before getting into such matters we must first look at what sociologists mean by stratification and social class. Then we will take in some influential theories of class and attempts to measure it before moving on to a more detailed look at social classes and lifestyles in the developed societies. The chapter also covers social mobility – how far up or down the social scale it is possible to move – and how much mobility there is today. Other forms of stratification may be explored in the readings at the end of the chapter.

For an extended discussion of schooling and the reproduction of inequalities, see chapter 16, 'Education'.

Systems of stratification

The concept of social stratification is used in sociology to describe structured inequalities between social groups within societies. Often we think of stratification in terms of assets or property, but it can be based on other attributes, such as gender, age, religious affiliation or military rank. Individuals and groups enjoy differential (unequal) access to rewards based on their position within the scheme. One way of thinking about this is to see stratification as similar to geological layering of rock in the Earth's surface. Societies can be seen as consisting of 'strata' in a hierarchy, with the more favoured at the top and the less privileged nearer the bottom. All socially stratified systems of this kind share three basic characteristics.

1. The rankings apply to social categories of people who share common characteristics without necessarily interacting or identifying with one another. For example, women may be ranked differently from men or wealthy people differently from the poor. Individuals from a particular category may move between ranks, but the category itself continues to exist.

2. People's life experiences and opportunities depend on the relative ranking of their social category. Being male or female, black or white, upper class or working class makes a big difference in terms of life chances – often as large as personal effort or good fortune.

3. The ranks of social categories tend to change only slowly. In the industrialized societies, for example, women have begun to achieve equality with men in many spheres of life only recently.

Gender issues and theories are discussed more fully in chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality'.

In the earliest hunting and gathering societies there was very little social stratification – mainly because there were very few resources to be divided or fought over. The development of settled agriculture produced considerably more wealth and resources and a corresponding increase in stratification, which increasingly came to resemble a pyramid, with a large number of people at the bottom and a much smaller number towards the top. Today, industrial and post-industrial societies are extremely complex and their stratification is more likely to resemble a teardrop, with a large number of people in the middle and lower-middle ranks, a smaller number at the very bottom and very few people at the top.

Historically, four basic systems of stratification can be distinguished: slavery, caste, estates and class. These are sometimes found in conjunction with one another and, though modern class systems are found right across the globe today, there is no simple chronology through the four types. For example, in recent years modern forms of slavery have emerged even within the class-based societies of the developed world.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Stratification seems to be a characteristic of all human societies. In what ways is a system of stratification functional for society as a whole? How does stratification help in the smooth running of a society?

Slavery

The most extreme form of stratification is one in which some people are actually owned by others – slavery. The legal conditions of slaveownership have varied considerably. Sometimes slaves were deprived of almost all rights by law, as on the Southern plantations in the pre-Civil War United States. In other societies their position was closer to that of servants, and in the ancient Greek city-state of Athens some slaves occupied positions of great responsibility. Some were literate and worked as government administrators, and a number were

trained in craft skills. They were excluded from political positions and the military but were accepted in most other occupations, though many began and ended their days in hard labour in the mines.

Throughout history, slaves have fought back against their subjection – black slave rebellions in the American South before the Civil War being a notable example. Because of such resistance, systems of slave labour have tended to be unstable. High productivity could be achieved only through constant supervision and brutal punishments. Slave-labour systems eventually broke down, partly because of the struggles they provoked and partly because economic or other incentives motivate people to produce more effectively than direct compulsion. Slavery is not a particularly economically efficient mode of production.

From the eighteenth century onwards, increasing numbers of people in Europe and America objected to slavery on moral grounds as unfitting for what they perceived were their own 'civilized' societies. The practice of transporting people for slavery was gradually outlawed. Today slavery is illegal across the world, but research confirms that large numbers of people are still trafficked across national borders and held against their will. From enslaved brickmakers in Pakistan to sex slaves in Thailand and domestic slaves in the UK and France, [modern slavery](#) has become a significant human rights violation.

Human trafficking, forced labour and marriage, and domestic servitude are growing problems, in many cases facilitated by the intensified globalization process.

Modern slavery is not legitimized by the state and is not a legally recognized *system* of stratification, but a report by HM Government (2018: 8) reveals that it is growing and also spreading geographically. Because it is a hidden form of exploitation where victims may be too traumatized to reveal their situation, or may not even recognize that they are victims, it is very difficult to arrive at accurate estimates of how many people are affected. A best estimate of the UK situation in 2013 was that there were between 10,000 and 13,000 victims of modern slavery (Silverman 2014). The International Labour Organization estimates around 40 million victims worldwide: 25 million in forced labour and 15 million in forced marriages (ILO 2017a: 9–10). Of these, some 71 per cent are women and girls, who make up 99 per cent of forced labour in the sex industry, while about one-quarter are children. Around 37 per cent of those forced into marriage are children.

As figure 9.1 illustrates, modern slavery exists in every region of the world and is most prevalent in Africa and Asia and the Pacific. Against

the expectations of many, and contrary to overly optimistic assessments, globalization processes also facilitate the forced movement of people across the world and into modern forms of enslavement (Bales et al. 2009).
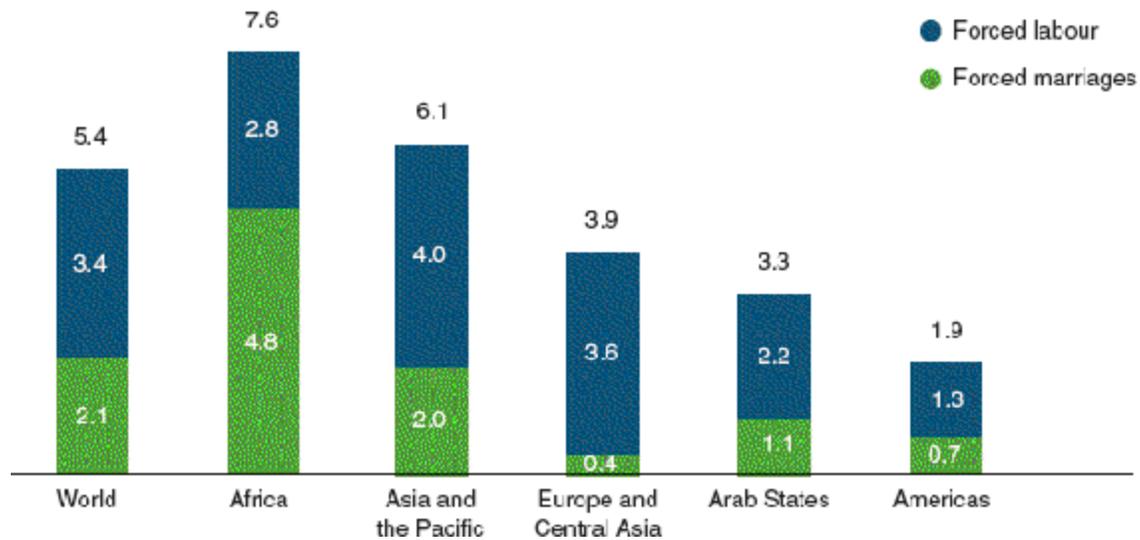
Figure 9.1 Regional prevalence of modern slavery (per 1,000 population)

Source: ILO (2017a: 26).

Caste

Caste systems are forms of stratification in which social position is given and all individuals remain at the social level of their birth. Everyone's social status is based on personal characteristics, such as perceived race, ethnicity, skin colour, parental religion or parental caste, that are accidents of birth and are therefore believed to be unchangeable. In a sense, caste societies can be seen as a special type of class society in which one's position is ascribed at birth (Sharma 1999). They have typically been found in agricultural societies such as in rural India or in South Africa before the end of white rule in 1992.

Before the modern period, caste systems were found throughout the world. In Europe, for example, Jews were frequently treated as a separate caste, forced to live in restricted neighbourhoods and barred from intermarrying and, in some instances, even interacting with non-Jews. The term 'ghetto' is said to derive from the Venetian word for

'foundry', the site of one of Europe's first official Jewish ghettos, established by the government of Venice in 1516. The term eventually came to refer to those sections of European towns where Jews were legally compelled to live, long before it was used to describe minority neighbourhoods, with their caste-like qualities of racial and ethnic segregation.

In caste systems, intimate contact with members of other castes is strongly discouraged. Such 'purity' of a caste is often maintained by rules of endogamy – marriage within one's social group as required by custom or law.

Caste in India and South Africa

The Indian caste system reflects Hindu religious beliefs and is at least 2,000 years old. According to Hindu scholars, there are four major castes, each roughly associated with broad occupational groupings: the *Brahmins* (scholars and spiritual leaders) at the top, followed by the *Ksyatriyas* (soldiers and rulers), the *Vaisyas* (farmers and merchants) and the *Shudras* (labourers and artisans). Beneath the four castes are those known as the 'untouchables', or *Dalits* ('oppressed people'), who – as their name suggests – are to be avoided at all costs. Untouchables are limited to the worst jobs in society, such as removing human waste, and they often resort to begging and searching garbage for food. In traditional areas of India, some members of higher castes still regard physical contact with untouchables to be so contaminating that a mere touch requires cleansing rituals. Following independence in 1947, India made it illegal in 1949 to discriminate on the basis of caste, though elements of the system remain in full force today, particularly in the more rural areas.

As India's modern capitalist economy brings people of different castes together, whether in the same workplace, on an aeroplane or in restaurants, it is increasingly difficult to maintain the rigid barriers required to sustain the caste system. As more and more of India is influenced by globalization processes, it seems reasonable to assume that the caste system will weaken further in the future.

Before its abolition in 1992, the South African caste system – termed [apartheid](#) – rigidly separated black Africans, Indians, 'coloureds' (people of mixed races) and Asians from whites. In this case, caste was based entirely on racial identification. Whites, who made up only 15 per cent of the total population, controlled virtually all the country's wealth, owned most of the usable land, ran the principal businesses and industries, and had a monopoly on political power, since blacks could not vote. Black people – who made up threequarters of the population – were segregated into impoverished *bantustans* (homelands) and were allowed out only to work for the white minority.

The apartheid system, with its widespread discrimination and oppression, created intense conflict between the white minority and the black, mixed-race and Asian majority. Decades of often violent struggle finally proved successful in the 1990s. The most powerful black organization, the African National Congress (ANC), mobilized an economically devastating global boycott of South African businesses, forcing South Africa's white leaders to dismantle the system, which was abolished by popular vote among white South Africans in 1992. In the country's first multiracial elections in 1994, Nelson Mandela – the ANC leader who had spent twenty-seven years in jail – was elected president. South Africa's version of a caste system came to an end, and the government adopted policies aimed at empowering black people and creating a 'patriotic' and 'productive' black capitalist class, as it seeks closer integration into the global capitalist economy (Southall 2004: 313).

Estates

[Estates](#) were part of European feudal societies, though they also existed in many other traditional civilizations. Feudal estates consisted of social strata with differing obligations towards one another and unequal sets of rights, some of these established in law. In Europe, the highest estate was composed of the *aristocracy* and gentry. The *clergy* formed another estate, having lower status but possessing some distinctive privileges. Those in what came to be called the 'third estate' were the *commoners* – serfs, free peasants, merchants and artisans. In contrast to castes, a certain degree of intermarriage and mobility was tolerated between the

estates. Commoners might be knighted, for example, in payment for special services given to the monarch, and merchants could sometimes purchase titles. Remnants of the estates system persist in Britain, where hereditary titles are still recognized and sought, though since 1999 peers are no longer automatically entitled to vote in the House of Lords. Similarly, business leaders, civil servants and others may be honoured with awards such as knighthoods for their services.

In the past, estate systems tended to develop wherever there was a traditional aristocracy based on the concept of noble birth. In feudal systems, such as in medieval Europe, estates were closely bound up with the manorial community – that is, they formed a local, rather than a national, system of stratification. In the centralized traditional empires, such as China or Japan, they were organized on a more national basis. Sometimes the differences between estates were justified by religious beliefs, although rarely in as strict a way as in the Hindu caste system.

The *Dalits* ('untouchables') occupy the lowest rung of the Indian caste system, traditionally limited to the lowest occupations and positions in society.

Class

A working definition of a class is a large-scale group of people who share common economic resources and social status, which strongly influence the type of lifestyles they are able to lead. Ownership of property and wealth and occupation are the main bases of class differences. Social classes differ from other forms of stratification in four main respects.

1. *Class systems are fluid*. Unlike other types of strata, classes are not established by legal or religious provision. The boundaries between classes are never clear-cut and there are no formal restrictions on intermarriage.

2. *Class positions are, at least partially, achieved*. An individual's class is not simply given at birth, as is the case in the other types of stratification systems. Social mobility – movement upwards and downwards in the class structure – is more common than in other systems.

3. *Class is economically based*. Classes are created in economic differences between groups of individuals – inequalities in the possession of material resources. In other stratification systems, non-economic factors tend to be more important.

4. *Class systems are large scale and impersonal*. Class systems operate mainly through large-scale, impersonal associations such as exist between businesses and their employees. Class differences occur in inequalities of pay and working conditions. In other systems of stratification, inequalities are expressed in personal relationships of duty or obligation, as between master and slave or between lower- and higher-caste individuals.

Most caste systems have already given way to class-based ones in industrial capitalist societies (Berger 1986). Industrial production demands that people move around freely to take up work to which they are suited or which they are able to do and to change jobs frequently according to economic conditions. The rigid restrictions found in caste systems are at odds with this necessary freedom. As globalization reshapes the world into a single economic system, remaining caste-like relationships will become increasingly vulnerable to the pressure for change. The next section looks at theories of social class, which has become the dominant form of social stratification globally.

Theorizing social class

Most sociological analyses of class and stratification take their lead from the ideas of Marx and Weber, sometimes working with elements of both. We open this section with these theorists before looking at some influential neo-Marxist ideas represented by the American sociologist Erik Olin Wright. The section ends with an introduction to intersectionality, a concept that helps to capture the ways in which diverse social inequalities intertwine in the real world.

Chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', contains an introduction to Marx and Weber, while chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', covers these in more detail.

Karl Marx's theory of class conflict

Most of Marx's work was concerned with capitalism and its social classes, though he did not provide a systematic discussion of the concept of class. The manuscript on which Marx was working at the time of his death (subsequently published as part of his major work, *Capital* (1867)), breaks off just at the point where he posed the question 'What constitutes a class?'. This means that Marx's concept has been reconstructed from his writings as a whole. There have been numerous interpretations of his work and many disputes about 'what Marx really meant'. Nevertheless, his central ideas are quite clear and are discussed in 'Classic studies' 9.1.

Max Weber: class, status and party

Weber's approach to stratification built on Marx's analysis, though he reached very different conclusions about the fate of capitalism and the

working classes. Like Marx, he regarded society as characterized by conflicts over power and resources. But, where Marx saw polarized class relations and economic issues at the heart of major social conflicts, Weber developed a more complex, multidimensional view of society. Social stratification is not a matter simply of class, according to Weber, but is shaped by two further aspects: status and party. In contrast to the bipolar model proposed by Marx, these three overlapping elements produce an enormous number of possible positions within society.

[Classic studies 9.1](#) Marx on class and revolution

The research problem

Nineteenth-century European industrialization transformed societies, in many ways for the better. But it also led to protests and revolutionary movements. As industrial societies developed in the twentieth century, strikes and militant activity by workers continued to occur. Why did workers protest even as societies became wealthier? Karl Marx (1818–83) studied class societies in an attempt to understand how they operated. His argument was that industrial societies were rooted in capitalist economic relations. But Marx was no detached academic observer; he was a key figure in communist politics and an activist in labour movements. For Marx, industrial capitalism, for all its progressive elements, was founded on an exploitative system of class relations and had to be overthrown.

Marx's explanation

For Marx, a social class is a group of people who stand in a common relationship to the [means of production](#) – the means by which they gain a livelihood. In this sense, all societies have a central class system. Before the rise of modern industry, the means of production in estate systems consisted of land and the instruments used to tend crops or pastoral animals. The two main classes were those who owned land (aristocrats, gentry or slave-holders) and those engaged in producing from it (serfs, slaves and free peasantry). In industrial societies, factories, offices, machinery and the wealth or capital needed to buy them have become more important. The two main classes consist of those who own the new means of production – industrialists or capitalists – and those who earn their living by selling their labour to them – the [working class](#) or, in the term Marx used, the [proletariat](#).

According to Marx, the relationship between classes is exploitative. In feudal societies, exploitation took the form of the direct transfer

of produce from the peasantry to the aristocracy. Serfs had to give a proportion of their production to their masters or to work a number of days each month to produce crops for the master's household. In industrial capitalist societies, the source of exploitation is less obvious. Marx argued that workers produce more than is actually needed by employers to repay the cost of hiring them. The surplus is the source of profit, which capitalists are then able to put to their own use. Say a group of workers in a clothing factory produce 100 suits a day. Selling seventy-five suits covers the cost of paying workers' wages and the cost of plant and equipment, so income from the remaining twenty-five suits can be taken as profit.

Marx was struck by the gross inequalities created by capitalism. With the development of modern industry, wealth is produced on a scale far beyond anything ever seen, but workers remain relatively poor, while the wealth accumulated by the propertied class grows. Marx used the term pauperization to describe the process by which the working class grows increasingly impoverished in relation to the capitalist class. Even if workers become more affluent in absolute terms, the gap separating them from the capitalist class continues to stretch ever wider. Recent protests against the vast wealth owned by the '1 per cent' at the top express something of this point.

The inequalities between capitalists and the working class were not strictly economic in nature. Marx saw that the mechanization of production means that work frequently becomes tedious, dull and unsatisfying and workers become alienated from their own labour and its products. Instead of being fulfilling in itself, work becomes simply a means of making money to survive. As large numbers of workers are gathered together in factories, Marx argued that a collective class consciousness would develop, as workers became acutely aware that, to improve their situation over the long term, a revolution would be necessary to overthrow the exploitative social relations of capitalism.

Critical points

Sociological debates on Marx's ideas have continued for more than 150 years, and it is impossible to do justice to them here. Instead, we can point to some major themes in Marxist criticism. First, Marx's characterization of capitalist society as splitting into 'two main camps' has been seen as too simple. Even within the working class there are divisions between skilled and unskilled workers, and such divisions have become more complex, with gender and ethnicity also factors leading to diverse life chances. As a result, critics argue, concerted action by the entire working class is very unlikely.

Second, Marx's forecast of a communist revolution led by the industrial working class in the advanced societies has not materialized, which calls into question his analysis of the dynamic of capitalism. Some contemporary Marxists still consider capitalism as eventually doomed, but critics see little evidence of this. Indeed, the majority of the working class have become increasingly affluent property-owners, with more of a stake in the capitalist system than ever before.

Third, although Marx saw class consciousness arising from the increasingly shared experiences of the working class, today people identify rather less with their social class position. Instead, there are multiple sources of identification, and class is not necessarily the most important. Without a developing and widespread class consciousness, there can be no concerted class action and, hence, no communist revolution. Again, critics see long-term social trends moving away from Marx's theoretical forecasts.

Contemporary significance

Marx's influence – not just in sociology, but on the world – has been enormous. Numerous regimes across the world have considered themselves 'Marxist', and opposition movements routinely draw on Marx's ideas for inspiration. Even though his major predictions have not proved correct, the analysis of capitalism he pioneered continues to inform our understanding of globalization. Indeed, it could be argued that the widespread recognition of rapid globalization has given fresh impetus to Marxist studies,

particularly with the recent emergence of international environmental, anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements.

See chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', for a discussion of anti-globalization movements.

Weber accepted Marx's view that social class is founded on objectively given economic conditions, but he saw a variety of economic factors as important in class formation. Class divisions derive not just from ownership or lack of ownership of the means of production but from economic differences that have nothing directly to do with property. These include skills and credentials, or qualifications, which affect the types of work that people are able to obtain. Weber argued that an individual's *market position* strongly influences their life chances. Those in managerial or professional occupations earn more and have more favourable conditions of work, for example, than people in working-class or 'blue-collar' jobs. The qualifications they possess, such as degrees, diplomas and the skills they have acquired, make them more 'marketable' than others without such qualifications. Similarly, among blue-collar workers, skilled craft workers are able to secure higher wages than the semi- or unskilled.

In Weber's work, status refers to differences between groups in the social honour or prestige they are accorded by others. In traditional societies, status was often determined on the basis of first-hand knowledge of a person gained through interactions in different contexts over a period of years. But, as societies grew more complex, it became impossible for status always to be accorded in this way. Instead status came to be expressed through people's *styles of life*. Markers and symbols of status – such as type of housing, dress, manner of speech and occupation – all shape an individual's social standing in the eyes of others. People sharing the same status then form a community in which there is a sense of shared identity.

While Marx maintained that status distinctions are the result of class divisions, Weber argued that status often varies independently of class. Possession of wealth can confer high status, but this is not universally the case. The term 'genteel poverty' refers to one example. In Britain, for example, people from aristocratic families continue to enjoy considerable social esteem even when their fortunes have been lost. Conversely, many bankers may be wealthy, but their social status has rarely been lower – the result of a widespread perception that their reckless lending caused the 2008 global economic crisis while their annual bonuses are excessive and have not been earned.

Weber also pointed out that party formation is an important aspect of *power* and can influence stratification independently of class and status. Party, in Weber's sense, refers to a group of individuals who work together because they have common backgrounds, aims or interests. Often a party works in an organized fashion towards a specific goal which is in the interest of its membership. Marx explained both status differences and party organization in terms of class, but neither, in fact, can be reduced to class divisions. Weber reasoned that, even though both are influenced by class, each can in turn influence the economic circumstances of individuals and groups, thereby affecting their class. Parties may appeal to concerns cutting across class differences. For example, parties may be based on religious affiliation or nationalist ideals. Marxists may explain the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland in class terms, since more Catholics than Protestants are in working-class jobs. Weberians would argue that this explanation is ineffective, as the parties to which people are affiliated express religious as well as class differences.

Weber's writings on stratification are important, because they show that other dimensions of stratification besides class strongly influence people's lives. Weber drew attention to the complex interplay of class, status and party as distinct aspects of social stratification, creating a more flexible basis for empirical studies of people's life chances.

Bringing Marx and Weber together?

The American sociologist Erik Olin Wright developed the Marxist theory of class to include elements of Weber's approach (Wright 1978, 1985, 1997). In doing so, he shifted away from a strict focus on the relationship to means of production and looked at the issue of how much control different social classes have in the production process. According to Wright, there are three dimensions of *control over economic resources* in modern capitalist production that allow us to identify the major classes that exist:

- control over investments or money capital

- control over the physical means of production – land or factories and offices

- control over labour power.

As Marx argued, those who belong to the capitalist class have control over each of these dimensions in the production system. Members of the working class have control over none of them. But in between these two main classes are groups whose position is ambiguous – managers and white-collar workers, for example. These groups are in *contradictory class locations*, because they are able to influence some aspects of production but are denied control over others. White-collar and professional employees have to sell their labour power to employers in order to make a living, just as manual workers do. But at the same time they have a greater degree of control over their work than most blue-collar workers. Wright calls these class positions 'contradictory', because the individuals concerned are neither capitalists nor workers, yet they share certain common features with each.

A large section of the population – 85 to 90 per cent according to Wright (1997) – falls into the category of those who are forced to sell their labour. Yet within this population there is great diversity, from the traditional, manual working class to white-collar workers. In order to differentiate class locations, Wright takes two factors into account: relationship to authority and the possession of skills and expertise. First, he argues that many middle-class workers, such as managers and supervisors, enjoy relationships towards authority that are more privileged than those of the working class. They assist in controlling the working class yet at the same time remain under the control of capitalist owners – they are both exploiters and exploited. Second, Wright argues that middle-class employees with skills that are in demand can exercise a specific form of power and can demand higher wages. This point is illustrated, for example, by the lucrative positions available to some information technology specialists in the emerging knowledge economy.

By combining elements from the perspectives of both Marx and Weber, Wright effectively shows that they are not necessarily diametrically opposed. He also demonstrates that, as capitalist societies have become more complex, sociology theories which try to understand them must also develop. One recent perspective which aims to connect inequalities of class with other major social divisions is intersectionality, and a brief discussion of this idea follows.

Intersecting inequalities

In the latter half of the twentieth century, sociological studies of inequality shifted away from an almost exclusive focus on social class to explore other inequalities of gender, ethnicity, sexuality and disability. It thus became increasingly clear that the theories and concepts used to study class were not easily transferable to other forms of inequality.

Following the pioneering work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), in recent years sociologists have come to accept that, if we are to understand the lives of people in contemporary societies, sociologists will need to find ways of connecting class with other inequalities (Andersen and Collins 2009; Rothman 2005). One

influential attempt to do so has been via the concept of intersectionality – the complex interweaving of diverse social inequalities which shapes individual lives and complicates the earlier, comparatively simple class analysis. As McLeod and Yates (2008: 348) argue, 'To only analyse class (or gender, or race …) is now understood as a political and analytical act of exclusion.'

Research into intersecting inequalities typically involves seeking to understand the real lives of individuals within their social context, though there is also an interest in the operation of power as it is maintained and reinforced through the main axes of class, gender and ethnicity (Berger and Guidroz 2009). But intersectional research is more than just 'class +' race, gender or other social divisions. Such an approach would privilege class over the other forms, theorizing the latter as somehow secondary to a primary focus on class. Instead, 'intersectionality posits that race, class, gender, sexuality, ability, and various aspects of identity are constitutive. Each informs the other, and taken together they produce a way of experiencing the world as sometimes oppressed and marginalized and sometimes privileged and advantaged depending on the context' (Smooth 2010: 34).

For example, when sociologists discuss and debate the experience of 'the working class', what exactly are they referring to? We cannot assume that social class forms the primary source of identity for all or even a majority of, say, working-class people, nor are their experiences necessarily similar. The lives of white, heterosexual, working-class men may be very different from those of black, working-class, lesbian women, and only empirical research will establish which of these constitutive forms of identity is more important in specific socio-historical contexts. As this example implies, intersectional research tends to adopt qualitative methods that are able to tap into people's real-life experiences, and this is one significant difference from conventional quantitative social class research.

Sociologists still study social identity and stratification in the workplace, but social class is losing its previous status as the 'master category' for understanding contemporary societies. Intersectional theory recognizes the existence of multiple forms of inequality and therefore of bases for identification.

There are some problems with intersectionality research. How many inequality and identity categories are there to be studied? This is often called the '*et cetera*' problem, as some scholars simply add 'etc.' onto class, gender and ethnicity to indicate there are many other sources (Lykke 2011). But, if this is so, how do researchers know that they have covered all of them in order to validate their findings? A second issue is the relative weight afforded to the different categories. Should we theorize them all as being broadly similar, or are there reasons to suppose that social class is a more significant force in shaping lives, especially in what are still capitalist societies?

Such questions are still being worked through in a growing body of intersectional research, and many social scientists today are seeking ways of better understanding the complexities of multicultural societies

and, in doing so, are moving beyond conventional forms of class analysis.

Discussions of intersectionality can also be found in the following chapters: 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'; 7, 'Gender and Sexuality'; 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'; 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'; 14, 'The Life Course'; and 17, 'Work and Employment'.

Mapping the class structure

Both theoretical and empirical studies have investigated the link between class position and other dimensions of social life, such as voting patterns, educational attainment and physical health. Yet, as we have seen, the concept of class is far from clear-cut. In both academic circles and common usage, the term 'class' is understood and used in a variety of ways. How can sociologists and researchers measure such an imprecise concept in their empirical work?

Class position as occupation?

When an abstract concept such as class is transformed into a measurable variable, we say that the concept has been *operationalized*. This means that it has been defined clearly and concretely enough to be tested in empirical research. Sociologists have operationalized class through a variety of schemes that attempt to map the class structure of society. These schemes provide a theoretical framework by which individuals are allocated to social class categories.

A common feature of most class schemes is that they are based on the occupational structure. Sociologists have seen class divisions as corresponding to material and social inequalities linked to types of employment. The development of capitalism and industrialism has been marked by a growing division of labour and an increasingly complicated occupational structure. Although it is no longer as true as it once was, occupation plays an important part in determining social position, life chances and level of material comfort. Social scientists have used occupation extensively as an indicator of social class because of the finding that individuals in the same occupation tend to experience similar degrees of social advantage or disadvantage, maintain comparable lifestyles, and share similar opportunities.

Class schemes based on the occupational structure take various forms. Some are largely descriptive, reflecting the shape of the occupational and class structure in society without addressing relations between social classes. These models have been favoured by scholars who see

stratification as unproblematic and part of the natural social order, such as those working in the functionalist tradition.

Functionalism was introduced in chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', and chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Other schemes are more theoretically informed, drawing on the ideas of Marx or Weber and concerned with explaining relations between classes in society. 'Relational' class schemes are favoured by sociologists working within conflict paradigms in order to demonstrate the divisions and tensions in society. Erik Olin Wright's theory of class, discussed above, is an example of a relational class scheme, because it seeks to depict the processes of class exploitation. John Goldthorpe's influential work, originally rooted in Weberian ideas of class (see 'Classic studies' 9.2), is another example of a relational scheme.

As 'Classic studies' 9.2 notes, the EGP class scheme has been widely used in empirical research. Yet it is important to note several significant limitations to all such schemes, which caution us against applying them uncritically. Clearly there are complexities involved in devising schemes that can reliably 'map' the class structure of society. Even within a relatively 'stable' occupational structure, measuring and mapping social class remains fraught with difficulty.

[Classic studies 9.2](#) John Goldthorpe and the EGP class schema

The research problem

What is the connection between the jobs we do – our occupations – and our class position? Is class simply the same thing as occupation? Do we then move *between* classes when we change jobs? And, if we retrain, move into higher education or become unemployed, does our class position also change? As sociologists, how should we carry out research into social class?

Many sociologists have been dissatisfied with *descriptive* class schemes, as these merely *reflect* existing social and material inequalities between classes but do not seek to *explain* the social processes that created them. With such concerns in mind, the British sociologist John Goldthorpe and colleagues created a scheme for use in empirical research on social mobility. The *Erikson–Goldthorpe–Portocarero schema* (EGP) (sometimes called the *Goldthorpe Class Schema* in the literature) was designed not to describe a hierarchy of classes but as a representation of the 'relational' nature of the contemporary class structure.

Goldthorpe's explanation

Goldthorpe's work has 'arguably generated the most influential occupation-based social classification in sociology and allied disciplines' (Evans 1992; Connelly et al. 2016: 4). Other sociologists have often pointed to the EGP classification as an example of a neo-Weberian class scheme. This is because the original scheme identified class location on the basis of two main factors: *market situation* and *work situation*. An individual's market situation concerns their level of pay, job security and prospects for advancement; it emphasizes material rewards and general life chances. The work situation, by contrast, focuses on questions of control, power and authority within the workplace. An individual's work situation is concerned with the degree of autonomy and the overall relations of control affecting employees.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Goldthorpe's comparative research encompassed a project on social mobility known as the CASMIN project (Comparative Analysis of Social Mobility in Industrial Nations). The outcomes of this project are significant, as the resulting classification was incorporated into the UK Office of National Statistics' own Socio-Economic Classification (ONS-SEC) and is widely used across Europe (Crompton 2008). The Goldthorpe/CASMIN and UK ONS-SEC schemes are shown in table 9.1, alongside the more commonly used sociological terms (on the right-hand side).

Originally encompassing eleven class locations, reduced to eight in the CASMIN research, the EGP scheme remains more detailed than many others. Yet, in common usage, class locations are still compressed into just three main class strata: a 'service' class (classes I and II), an 'intermediate class' (classes III and IV) and a

'working class' (classes V, VI and VII). Goldthorpe acknowledges the presence of an elite class of property-holders at the very top of the scheme but argues that it is such a small segment of society that it is not meaningful as a category in empirical studies.

Goldthorpe (2000) has emphasized *employment relations* within his scheme rather than 'work situation', as described above. In doing so, he draws attention to different types of employment contract. A *labour contract* supposes an exchange of wages and effort which is specifically defined and delimited, while a *service contract* has a 'prospective' element, such as the possibility of salary growth or promotion. According to Goldthorpe, the working class is characterized by labour contracts and the service class by service contracts; the intermediate class locations experience intermediate types of employment relations.

Critical points

Occupational class schemes are difficult to apply to the *economically inactive*, such as the unemployed, students, pensioners and children. Unemployed and retired individuals are often classified on the basis of their previous work activity, but this can be problematic with the long-term unemployed or people with sporadic work histories. Students can sometimes be classified according to their subject, but this is likely to be successful only where the field of study correlates closely to a specific occupation, such as engineering or medicine.

At the other end of the scale, class schemes based on occupational distinctions have been unable to reflect the importance of propertyownership and wealth concentrated within the economic elite. Marxist scholars see this as a crucial failing. Occupational titles alone are not sufficient indicators of an individual's wealth and overall level of assets. This is particularly true among the richest members of society, including entrepreneurs, financiers and the 'old rich', whose occupational titles of 'director' or 'executive' place them in the same category as many professionals of much more limited means.

John Westergaard has disputed Goldthorpe's view that, because they are so few in number, the rich can be excluded from schemes

detailing class structure. As he argues: 'It is the intense concentration of power and privilege in so few hands that makes these people top. Their socio-structural weight overall, immensely disproportionate to their small numbers, makes the society they top a class society, whatever may be the pattern of divisions beneath them' (Westergaard 1995: 127). In a sense, such criticisms are a reflection of the longstanding debate between Marxist and Weberian scholars on social class.

Contemporary significance

Goldthorpe's work and the EGP scheme have been at the centre of debates on social class and occupations for quite some time. In spite of some highly pertinent criticisms, this class scheme, while remaining within the broadly Weberian tradition of sociology, has been constantly updated and refined. The scheme is very widely used in the UK, Europe, North America and Australasia, and it would seem that Goldthorpe's ideas and the EGP are likely to become more rather than less influential in the future.

Where do the unemployed or those seeking work fit into a class scheme?

The rapid economic transformation since the 1970s has made the measurement of class even more problematic, leading some to question the usefulness of class itself as a central concept. New occupational categories are emerging, there has been a general shift away from manufacturing towards services and knowledge work, and a very large number of women have entered the workforce. Occupational class schemes are not necessarily well suited to capturing such dynamic processes of class formation, mobility and change.

Class divisions in the developed world

The question of the upper class

Is there still a distinctive upper class in the developed societies, founded on the ownership of property and wealth? Or should we talk of a broader service class, as Goldthorpe suggests? Of course, Goldthorpe also recognizes an elite upper class, but this is so small it is difficult to build into representative social surveys. On the other hand, the elite upper class today is not the same as the landed aristocracy of the estates systems. Instead, it is a capitalist class whose wealth and power is derived from profit-making in global markets.

One way of approaching this issue is to see how far wealth and income are concentrated in the hands of a few people. Reliable information about personal wealth is difficult to obtain, as the affluent do not normally publicize the full range of their assets and some governments hold more accurate statistics than others. It has often been remarked that we know far more about the poor than we do about the wealthy. What is certain is that large amounts of wealth are concentrated in the hands of a small minority of individuals and families.

Chapter 6, 'Global Inequality', discusses both the 'rich list' and extreme global inequality in more detail.

In Britain, for example, between 2014 and 2016 the wealthiest 10 per cent of households owned around five times more wealth than the bottom 50 per cent of households combined (ONS 2018c; Figure 9.2). Both during and after the 2008 banking and credit crisis the richest individuals were still able to protect their wealth. In 2009–10, the total wealth of the 1,000 richest individuals in the UK actually rose by £77 billion, to £335.5 billion, equivalent to over one-third of the country's

national debt (*Sunday Times* 2010). Indeed, the wealthiest 10 per cent of the population of Britain has consistently owned between 40 and 50 per cent of the total marketable wealth in the country, while the least wealthy 50 per cent consistently owns less than 10 per cent.
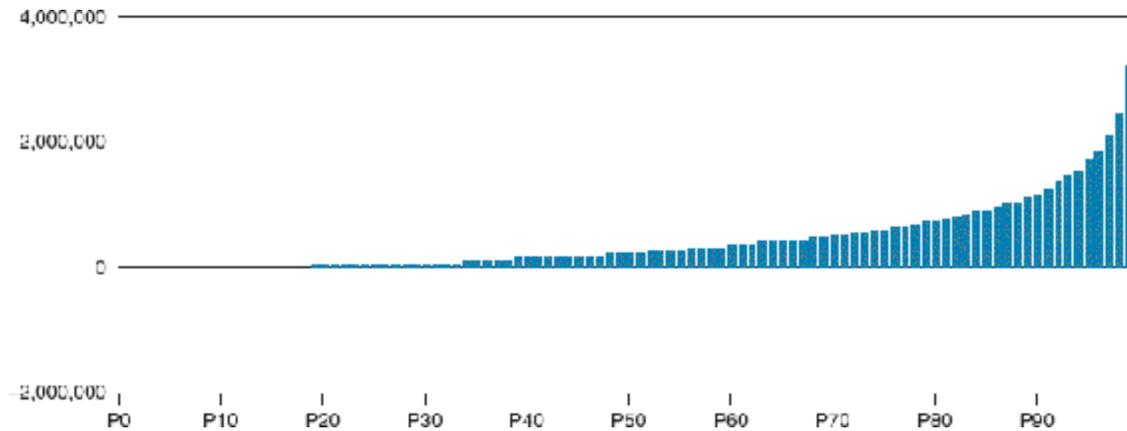
Figure 9.2 Distribution of total household wealth (£), percentile points, Great Britain, July 2014–June 2016

Notes:

1. Bottom 10% of households have total wealth of £13,900 or less.

2. Median total household wealth is £262,400.

3. Top 10% of households have total wealth of £1,224,900 or more.

4. Top 1% of households have total wealth of £3,243,400 or more.

Source: ONS (2018c: 9).

Historically, it has been very difficult to arrive at an overall picture of global wealth distribution because of the problems of datagathering in some countries. However, a 2007 study by the World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University covers all the countries of the world, looking at household wealth, shares and other financial assets, as well as land and buildings, making it the most comprehensive global survey of personal wealth undertaken to date. The survey found that the richest 2 per cent of the global population own more than half of global household wealth. It also found that, while the richest 10 per cent of adults owned 85 per cent of global wealth, the bottom 50 per cent owned just 1 per cent (Davies et al. 2007). Clearly, the global pattern of wealth distribution is even more

unequal than a single national case, reflecting the gross inequalities between the industrialized countries and those in the developing world (see ['Global society' 9.1](#)).

Despite the concentration of wealth in relatively few hands, 'the rich' do not constitute a homogeneous group. Nor is this a static category, as people follow varying trajectories into and out of wealth. Like poverty, wealth must be regarded in the context of life cycles. Some individuals become wealthy very quickly, only to lose much of it, while others experience a gradual growth or decline in assets over time. Some rich people were born into families of 'old money' – wealth passed down several generations – while other affluent individuals are 'self-made', having successfully built up their wealth from more humble beginnings. Next to members of longstanding affluent families are music and film celebrities, top athletes, and representatives of the 'new elite' who have made fortunes through the development and promotion of computing, mobile telecommunications and the internet.

[Global society 9.1]{.underline} Are you on the global 'rich list'?

Globally the developed countries are home to a majority of the world's wealthiest people. The extract below is from a 2015 report by the Pew Research Center in the USA, exploring where the world's wealthiest live.

Advanced economies in Europe and North America are home to most of the world's upper-middle income and high-income populations. The gap between them and the rest of the world on this score narrowed only slightly from 2001 to 2011, despite the booming Chinese economy …

Europe and North America continue to dominate the top rung of the income ladder. Some 87% of the global high-income population, with $50 or more at their disposal daily, lived there in 2011, compared with 91% in 2001. Within this group, Western Europe gained on the U.S. with respect to the shares of their populations that are high income. Among the countries included in this study, several had higher shares of their populations living on more than $50 per day in 2011 than the U.S. In order, they are Norway, Luxembourg, Denmark, the Netherlands, Iceland, Germany, Finland and Canada….

Globally, there was little change in the share of people living at the higher ends of the income scale…. only 16% of the global population lived on more than the middle-income level in 2011, up slightly from 14% in 2001. This comprises the 9% of the global population that was upper-middle income in 2011 and the 7% that was high income. Thus, stepping over the $20 daily threshold is still beyond the means of most of the global population.

At the same time, many people in advanced economies live on incomes above this threshold. In the U.S., for example, the median daily per capita income was $56 in 2011 and 88% of the population lived on more than $20 per day. A similar scenario unfolds in other

advanced economies, underscoring the vast economic gulf that separates them from the rest of the world.

Other noteworthy trends have arisen in recent years, which we can observe from UK data. First, 'self-made millionaires' are in the majority of the very wealthiest individuals and families, including many who made fortunes in the digital revolution. For instance, King Digital Entertainment saw four of its members make the 2010 list, largely on account of the phenomenal success of the game Candy Crush Saga (*Sunday Times* 2010). By 2018 some 96 per cent of the 1,000 richest had made their own wealth rather than inheriting it (Watts 2018). Second, in 2014, the wealth of Britain's richest 1,000 people had risen by 15 per cent in a single year, and their combined fortune of £520 billion amounted to about one-third of Britain's entire GDP (Mclennan 2014). This rise contrasted sharply with widespread wage stagnation, 'austerity' policies and public-sector cuts following the 2008 financial crash.

Third, a growing number of women are entering the ranks of the very wealthiest. In 1989, there were only six women among the wealthiest Britons, but by 2018 that number had risen to 141 (BBC News 2018d). Fourth, minority ethnic groups, particularly people of Asian origin, are an increasing presence among the super-rich, with eighty-six in the 2018 list compared with just five in 1989 (Watts 2018). However, more than 90 per cent of individuals on the list were still white. Finally, many of the richest people in Britain were not born in the country but made it their place of residence for a variety of reasons, including relatively low rates of tax for the super-rich.

In this radically changed situation it may appear that there is no longer a distinct upper class, but this assumption is questionable. The upper class today has certainly changed its shape, but it still retains its distinctive position. John Scott (1991) pointed to three particular groups that together form a constellation of interests controlling and profiting from big business: senior executives in large corporations, industrial entrepreneurs and 'finance capitalists'. Senior executives may not actually own the businesses they run, but their shareholdings

connect them to industrial entrepreneurs. Policies encouraging entrepreneurship during the 1980s and the information technology boom of the 1990s led to a new wave of entry into the upper class of people who have made fortunes from business and technological advances.

Dreadful business, Jeeves. We only have each other now. Have these pressed by morning.

Finance capitalists, a category that includes the people who run insurance companies, bankers, investment fund managers and managers of other organizations that are large institutional shareholders, are, in Scott's view, among the core of the upper class today. At the same time, the growth of corporate shareholding among middle-class households has broadened the profile of corporate ownership. Yet the concentration of power and wealth in the upper class remains intact. While corporate-ownership patterns may be more diffuse today, it is still a small minority who benefit substantially from shareholding.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Successful city traders and hedge fund managers can reap spectacular financial rewards. Which social class are they in? How do their activities fit into Goldthorpe's relational scheme?

We can conclude that we do need the concepts of the upper class and the service class. The upper class consists of a small minority of individuals who have both wealth and power and are able to transmit their privileges to their children. This class can be roughly identified as the top 1 per cent of wealth-holders. Below them are the service class and the intermediate class, consisting, as Goldthorpe says, of professionals, managers and many non-manual, higher grade occupations. In common usage, the latter two categories are part of the middle class, and it is to this class that we now turn.

The expanding middle class

The 'middle class' covers a broad spectrum of people working in many different occupations, from employees in the service industries to school teachers and medical professionals. Some authors prefer to speak of 'middle classes' in order to take account of this diversity, which also includes status situations and life chances. The middle class now encompasses the majority of the population in Britain and other industrialized countries. This is largely because the proportion of white-collar jobs rose markedly relative to blue-collar ones over the course of the twentieth century.

See chapter 17, 'Work and Employment', for more on the rise of white-collar jobs.

Members of the middle class, via their educational credentials or technical qualifications, occupy positions that provide them with greater material and cultural advantages than those of manual workers. Unlike the working class, members of the middle class can sell their mental *and* physical labour power to earn a living. While this distinction is useful in forming a rough division between the middle and working classes, the dynamic nature of the occupational structure

and the possibility of upward and downward social mobility make it difficult to define the boundaries of the middle class with any precision.

David Beckham, born into a working-class family in East London, had a highly successful football career and diversified into fashion. Does his fortune mean that Beckham is now part of the upper class?

The middle class is not internally cohesive and is unlikely to become so, given the diversity of its members' interests (Butler and Savage 1995). This relatively 'loose' composition of the middle class has been its abiding feature since the early nineteenth century (Stewart 2010). Professional, managerial and administrative occupations have been among the fastest growing sectors of the middle class, and there are several reasons why this is so.

The first is that the spread of post-1945 bureaucracies has created opportunities and a demand for employees to work within institutional settings. Doctors and lawyers, who might have been self-employed in earlier times, now tend to work in institutional environments. Second, the increase in the number of professionals is a reflection of the expanding number of people who work in sectors of the economy where the government plays a major role. The creation of the welfare

state led to an enormous growth in professions such as social work, teaching and healthcare. Finally, with the deepening of economic and industrial development, there has been an ever-rising demand for the services of experts in the fields of law, finance, accounting, technology and information systems. In this sense, professions can be seen both as a product of the modern era and as central to its evolution and expansion.

Professionals, managers and higher-level administrators gain their position largely from their possession of credentials – degrees, diplomas and other qualifications. As a whole, they enjoy relatively secure and well-paid careers, and their separation from people in routine non-manual jobs has grown more pronounced in recent years. Some authors have seen professionals and other higher white-collar groups as forming a specific class – the 'professional/managerial class' (Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich 1979; Glover and Hughes 1996) – or what Goldthorpe calls 'the service class'. Others argue that the degree of division between them and white-collar workers is not deep or clear-cut enough to make such a position defensible.

There has been interest in how white-collar professionals join together to maximize their interests and secure high levels of material reward and prestige. The medical profession clearly illustrates this process (Hafferty and Castellani 2011). Some groups within the medical profession, particularly doctors, have successfully organized themselves to protect their status, ensuring a high level of material rewards. This is an instance of a group strategy that Weber called social closure, the erection and maintenance of boundaries by social and occupational groups, which restrict entry and enforce the rules for members.

For medics, three main dimensions of *professionalism* have enabled this form of closure to happen: entry into the profession is restricted to those who meet a strict set of criteria (qualifications); a professional association, such as the British Medical Association, monitors and disciplines members' conduct and performance; and it is generally accepted that only members of the profession are qualified to practise medicine. As a result, self-governing professional associations are able

to exclude unwanted individuals and so enhance the market position of their own members – a key characteristic of middle-class occupations.

The changing working class

Marx forecast that the working class would become progressively larger – the basis for his thesis that the working class would realize their shared, exploited situation and rebel. But, in fact, the traditional working class has reduced in size as the middle class has expanded. In the 1960s, some 40 per cent of the working populations of developed societies were employed in blue-collar work. Today this has reduced to around 15 per cent. Moreover, the conditions under which working-class people live and the styles of life they follow have substantially improved.

The developed countries do have significant numbers of people living in poverty. But the majority of those in working-class occupations no longer live in poverty. The income of manual workers has increased considerably since the early twentieth century, and the rising standard of living is expressed in the increased availability of consumer goods to all classes. Cars, washing machines, televisions, computers, mobile phones, and much more are owned by a very high proportion of working-class households. Similarly, many working-class families own their own homes and regularly take foreign holidays.

We examine this issue more closely in chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

The phenomenon of working-class affluence suggests yet another possible route towards a 'middle-class society'. As blue-collar workers grow more prosperous, do they become middle class? This idea is known as the embourgeoisement thesis – simply, the process through which more people become 'bourgeois', or middle class, as a result of

increasing affluence. In the 1950s, when the thesis was first advanced, it was argued that many well-paid blue-collar workers would also adopt middle-class values, outlooks and lifestyles. Economic development was having a powerful effect on the shape of social stratification.

In the 1960s, John Goldthorpe and his colleagues in the UK carried out a study designed to test the embourgeoisement hypothesis. They argued that, if the thesis was correct, affluent blue-collar employees should be virtually indistinguishable from white-collar employees in terms of attitudes to work, lifestyle and politics. The research, known as *The Affluent Worker* study (Goldthorpe 1968–9), was based on interviews with workers in the car and chemical industries in Luton: 229 manual workers were interviewed, together with fifty-four white-collar workers for purposes of comparison. Many of the blue-collar workers had migrated to the area specifically in search of well-paid jobs and, compared with most other manual workers, were highly paid, even earning more than most lower-level white-collar workers.

The Affluent Worker study focused on three dimensions of working-class attitudes but found very little support for the embourgeoisement thesis. First, it found that many workers had acquired a 'middle-class' standard of living in their incomes and ownership of consumer goods. Yet this relative affluence was gained in jobs characterized by poor benefits, low chances of promotion and little job satisfaction. The affluent workers saw their job simply as a means to gaining good wages, but the work was repetitive and uninteresting and they had little commitment to it.

Second, the affluent workers did not associate with white-collar workers in their leisure time and did not aspire to climb the class ladder. Their socializing was done at home with immediate [family](#) members and kin or with working-class neighbours. There was little indication that they were adopting middle-class norms and values. And, third, there was a negative correlation between working-class affluence and support for the Conservative Party. Supporters of the embourgeoisement thesis predicted that growing affluence would weaken the affluent workers' traditional support for the Labour Party.

The results of this study were clear-cut: the embourgeoisement thesis was wrong. However, Goldthorpe and his colleagues did concede the possibility of some convergence between the lower middle class and upper working class. Affluent workers shared similar patterns of consumption, a privatized, home-centred outlook, and support for instrumental collectivism (joining unions to improve wages and conditions) at the workplace.

No strictly comparable research has been carried out in the intervening years, and it is not clear how far the conclusions reached by Goldthorpe's team remain true now. However, it is generally accepted that older, traditional, working-class communities have become fragmented with the decline of manufacturing industry and the impact of consumerism. But how far this fragmentation has proceeded remains a matter of evidence and debate.

> ## THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> How would you describe the major changes in class systems since the early twentieth century? Do these changes provide evidence that class is becoming less important for sociologists trying to understand contemporary societies?

Is there an underclass?

The term 'underclass' has been used to describe that segment of the population located at the very bottom of – literally underneath – the class structure. Members of the underclass are said to have significantly lower living standards than the majority, and many are among the long-term unemployed or drift into and out of paid work, spending long periods dependent on welfare benefits. Hence they are 'marginalized' or 'socially excluded' from the way of life of the bulk of the population.

The underclass debate originated in the USA, where the preponderance of poor black communities in inner-city areas prompted talk of a 'black underclass' (Wilson 1978; Murray 1984, 1990; Lister 1996). But the term 'underclass' is a contested one that has been at the centre of a furious sociological debate since the late 1980s. Although it has entered

everyday speech, many scholars and commentators are wary of using it at all, as it encompasses a broad spectrum of meanings that are politically charged and carry negative connotations.

Does the American theory of an underclass make sense in Europe? Consider Muslims living in East London; is it race, class or something else that leads to disadvantage?

An influential contribution was made by Charles Murray (1984), who argued that African Americans in the USA are at the bottom of society as a result of the unintended consequences of state welfare policies. This is similar to the 'culture of poverty' thesis, which sees people becoming dependent on welfare and having little incentive to find work, build solid communities or make stable marriages. A dependency culture is then created that is transmitted across generations.

In response to Murray's claims, and drawing on research in Chicago, Wilson (1999) argued that the movement of whites from cities to the suburbs, the decline of urban industries and other urban economic problems led to high rates of unemployment among African-American men. He explained the aspects of social disintegration to which Murray

pointed, including the high proportion of unmarried black mothers, in terms of the shrinking available pool of 'marriageable' (employed) men. Wilson examined the role of these processes in creating spatially concentrated pockets of urban deprivation populated by a so-called ghetto poor of predominantly African-American and Hispanic people. These groups experienced multiple deprivation, from low educational qualifications and poor health to high levels of criminal victimization. They were also disadvantaged by a weak urban infrastructure with inadequate public transport, community facilities and educational institutions, which further reduced their chances of integrating into society.

Wilson's focus on the structural and spatial aspects of underclass formation were mirrored in the UK in Lydia Morris's (1993, 1995) research into long-term unemployment in the wake of the decline of heavy industries in North-East England that were once major sources of employment. Nevertheless, she concluded that 'there is no direct evidence in my study of a distinctive culture of the "underclass"' (1993: 410). What she found was that even the long-term unemployed (those without a job for more than a year) were actively seeking work and had not adopted an anti-work culture. What they lacked were the social contacts that many employed respondents had. This research again moves away from exploring individual motivations in isolation from wider social processes (Crompton 2008).

While debates on the underclass in the USA centred on the ethnic dimension, discussion of 'the underclass' in Europe was tied to issues of race, ethnicity and migration in major European cities such as London, Manchester, Rotterdam, Frankfurt, Paris and Naples, particularly within neighbourhoods marked by severe economic deprivation. The majority of poor and unemployed people in Western European countries were born in those countries, but there are also many first- and second-generation immigrants living in poverty, trapped in deteriorating inner-city neighbourhoods. Migrants in search of a better standard of living, such as the sizeable populations of Turks in Germany, Algerians in France and Albanians in Italy, for example, are often found in casual jobs with low wages and few career prospects. Furthermore, migrants' earnings are frequently sent home to support family members, further

contributing to the precariously low standard of living of recent immigrants.

The concept of an underclass is less effective in European countries, where there is not the same marked level of separation between those who live in conditions of deprivation and the rest of the society. Arguably, it remains more useful in the USA, though even here some studies suggest that accounts of a 'defeated and disconnected underclass' are exaggerated. Research into fast-food workers and homeless street traders has found that the separation between the urban poor and the rest of society is not as great as scholars of the underclass initially believed (Duneier 1999; Newman 2000). Many researchers in Europe prefer the concept of 'social exclusion', which is broader and has the advantage that it emphasizes social processes – mechanisms of exclusion – rather than individual situation. Others consider that the much older concept of poverty, especially as this is manifested in inner-city areas, remains more useful than the politically loaded notion of an underclass created by overly generous welfare systems.

Social exclusion is discussed in detail in chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

Class and lifestyles

In analysing people's class location, sociologists have conventionally relied on indicators such as market position, occupation and relationship to the means of production. However, more recently it has been argued that we should evaluate class location not only, or even mainly, in terms of economics and employment but also in relation to cultural factors such as lifestyle and consumption patterns. Ulrich Beck (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001: 203) argued that the concept of social class has lost its purchase in today's complex societies and has become

a 'zombie category' in sociology – essentially lifeless in society at large, but still stalking the discipline's practitioners. According to the 'cultural turn' in stratification research, contemporary societies are now marked by the greater significance of 'symbols' and markers of consumption, which play a crucial role in daily life. Individual identities are structured to a larger extent around lifestyle choices – such as how we dress, what we eat, how we care for our bodies and where we relax – and less around conventional class indicators such as the type of work we do.

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu argued that lifestyle choices are an important indicator of class. He saw that *economic capital* – material goods such as property, wealth and income – was important, but he argued that it could provide only a partial understanding of social class as it is lived (Crompton 2008). He identifies four forms of 'capital' that characterize class position, of which economic capital is only one: the others are cultural, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986).

See chapter 16, 'Education', for an extended discussion of Bourdieu's theoretical scheme.

Bourdieu argues that people increasingly distinguish themselves from others not on economic criteria but on the basis of *cultural capital* – including education, appreciation of the arts, consumption and leisure pursuits. They are aided in the process of accumulating cultural capital by a proliferation of 'need merchants' selling goods and services – either symbolic or actual – for consumption. Advertisers, marketers, social media-based influencers, fashion designers, style consultants, interior designers, personal trainers, therapists and many others seek to influence cultural tastes and promote lifestyle choices among communities of consumers.

Also important in Bourdieu's analysis of class is *social capital* – our networks of friends and other contacts. Bourdieu (1992) defined social

capital as the resources that individuals or groups gain through their long-lasting networks of relationships with influential families and other powerful contacts. The concept of social capital has since become an important and productive one in contemporary sociology. Lastly, Bourdieu argues that *symbolic capital* – which includes possession of a 'good reputation' – is an important indication of social class. The idea of symbolic capital is similar to that of social status, being based on other people's assessment of us.

In Bourdieu's account, each type of capital is related, and being in possession of one can help in the pursuit of others. A businesswoman who earns a large amount of money (economic capital) may not have much knowledge of the arts, but she can pay for her children to attend private schools where these pursuits are encouraged, so the children gain cultural capital. The businesswoman's money may lead her to make contacts with senior people in business and her children will meet others from wealthy families, so she, and they, will gain in social capital. Similarly, someone with a large group of well-connected friends (social capital) might be quickly promoted to a senior position in a company where they do well, thus gaining economic and symbolic capital.

Other scholars agree that class divisions can be linked to distinctive lifestyle and consumption patterns. Thus, speaking of groupings within the middle class, Savage and his colleagues (1992) identified three sectors based on cultural tastes and 'assets'. Professionals in public service, who are high in cultural capital and low in economic capital, tend to pursue healthy, active lifestyles involving exercise, low alcohol consumption, and participation in cultural and community activities. Managers and bureaucrats, by contrast, are typified by 'indistinctive' patterns of consumption, which involve average or low levels of exercise, little engagement with cultural activities, and a preference for traditional styles in home furnishings and fashion. The third grouping, the 'postmoderns', pursue a lifestyle that lacks any defining principle and may contain elements not traditionally enjoyed together. Thus, horse-riding and an interest in classical literature may be accompanied by a fascination with extreme sports such as rock-climbing and a love of raves and illicit use of the drug Ecstasy (MDMA).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

9.1 The death of class?

In recent years there has been a vigorous debate within sociology about the usefulness of 'class'. Some sociologists, such as Ray Pahl, have even questioned whether it is still a useful concept in attempting to understand contemporary societies. Two Australian academics, Jan Pakulski and Malcolm Waters, have been prominent among those who argue that class is no longer the key to understanding contemporary societies. In their book *The Death of Class* (1996), they argue that contemporary societies have undergone profound social changes and are no longer to be accurately seen as 'class societies'.

A time of social change

Pakulski and Waters argue that industrial societies are now undergoing a period of tremendous social change. We are witnessing a period in which the political, social and economic importance of class are in decline. Industrial societies have changed from being organized class societies to a new stage, which Pakulski and Waters call 'status conventionalism'. They use this term to indicate that inequalities, although they remain, are the result of differences in status (prestige) and in the lifestyle and consumption patterns favoured by such status groups. Class is no longer an important factor in a person's identity, and class communities ... [are becoming] a thing of the past. These changes in turn mean that attempts to explain political and social behaviour by reference to class are also out of date. Class, it seems, is well and truly dead ...

Increase in consumer power

These changes have been accompanied by an increase in consumer power. In ever more competitive and diverse markets, firms have to be much more sensitive in heeding the wishes of consumers. There has thus been a shift in the balance of power in advanced industrial

societies. What marks out the underprivileged in contemporary society – what Pakulski and Waters refer to as an 'ascriptively disprivileged underclass' – is their inability to engage in 'status consumption' – which is to say, their inability to buy cars, clothes, houses, holidays and other consumer goods. For Pakulski and Waters, contemporary societies are stratified, but this stratification is achieved through cultural consumption, not class position in the division of labour. It is all a matter of style, taste and status (prestige), not of location in the division of labour.

Status-based consumption has become a key source of identity-building in modern societies.

Processes of globalization

The shift from organized class society to status conventionalism is explained as being the result of processes of globalization, changes in the economy, technology and politics. Pakulski and Waters argue that globalization has led to a new international division of labour, in which the 'first world' is increasingly post-industrial – there are simply fewer of the sort of manual working-class occupations which characterized the previous era of 'organized class society'. At the same time, in a globalized world, nation-states are less self-

contained and are less able to govern either their population or market forces than they once were. Stratification and inequality still exist, but they do so more on a global than a national basis; we see more significant inequalities between different nations than we do within a nation-state …

Nothing but a theory?

John Scott and Lydia Morris [Scott and Morris 1996] argue for a need to make distinctions between the class positions of individuals – their location in a division of labour – and the collective phenomena of social class through which people express a sense of belonging to a group and have a shared sense of identity and values. This last sense of class (a more subjective and collective sense) may or may not exist in a society at a particular time – it will depend on many social, economic and political factors.

It is this last aspect of class that appears to have diminished in recent years. This does not mean that status and the cultural aspects of stratification are now so dominant that the economic aspects of class are of no significance; indeed, mobility studies and inequalities of wealth indicate the opposite. Class is not dead – it is just becoming that bit more complex!

Source: Extracted from Abbott (2001).

THINKING CRITICALLY

What is your own class background? Are you in a different social class to that of your grandparents? Is class still a factor in your perception of who you are, or are other aspects of your identity more significant?

Le Roux and her colleagues (2007) investigated the cultural tastes and participation of a stratified, random sample of just over 1,500 people in areas such as sport, television, eating out, music and leisure. They found that class boundaries were being redrawn in quite unexpected ways:

Our findings suggest that class boundaries are being redrawn through the increasing interplay between economic and cultural capital. Those members of the 'service class' who do not typically possess graduate level credentials, especially those in lower managerial positions, are more similar to the intermediate classes than they are to the other sections of the professional middle class. Boundaries are also being re-drawn within the working class, where lower supervisory and technical occupations have been downgraded so that they have become similar to those in semi-routine and routine positions. (2007: 22)

However, this does not mean that social class is no longer relevant. In fact, the authors conclude, class divisions are central to the organization of cultural tastes and practices in the UK.

In 2011, the BBC conducted a web-based survey of social class in the UK which drew 161,400 respondents, making it the largest survey of class ever conducted. Mike Savage and his colleagues (2013) analysed these data alongside a national representative survey. Using Pierre Bourdieu's theory of social, cultural and economic capital, and taking in occupation, leisure interests, food preferences, social relationships and more, the research team derived a 'new model' of the class system.

The new model found a fragmentation of the conventional working and middle classes but also suggested that an elite exists at the top of society which enjoys very high economic capital, high social capital and very high cultural capital. Among this elite are barristers, judges, chief executive officers and PR directors with mean household incomes at the time of £89,000 per annum. But at the bottom of the class system is what Savage and others call a 'precariat', around 15 per cent of the population which has poor economic capital (mean household income then of £8,000 per annum) and low social and cultural capital, including cleaners, caretakers, cashiers and care workers. Those within the precariat tend to be located in old industrial areas; they are very unlikely to have attended university, and their work is often in the gig economy, which brings high levels of insecurity. With an elite group at the top and an insecure, precariously situated class at the bottom, this analysis illustrates the polarization of inequality in twenty-first-century Britain.

It would be difficult to dispute that stratification *within* classes, as well as *between* classes, has come to depend not only on occupational differences but also on differences in consumption, lifestyles and social relationships. This is borne out by looking at trends in society as a whole. The rapid expansion of the service sector and the entertainment and leisure industries, for example, reflects an increasing emphasis on consumption. Modern societies have become consumer societies geared to the desiring and acquisition of material goods. And, though such mass consumption might suggest a growing uniformity of products, since the 1970s there has been an increasing differentiation of production and consumption patterns running alongside class differences, which Bourdieu (1986) suggests can intensify class distinctions through fine variations in lifestyle and 'taste'.

Despite this, and as Bourdieu makes clear, we cannot ignore the critical role played by economic factors in the reproduction of social inequalities. For the most part, people experiencing extreme social and material deprivations are not doing so as part of their lifestyle choices. Rather, their circumstances are constrained by factors relating to the economic and occupational structure (Crompton 2008). In the present period, when economies across the world are still recovering from recession and a rapid global economic downturn, lifestyle choices may be increasingly constrained by economic situation and class position.

Gender and stratification

For many years, research on stratification was 'gender-blind' – written as though women did not exist or as though, for purposes of studying divisions of power, wealth and prestige, women were unimportant. Yet gender itself is one of the most profound examples of social stratification, and all societies are structured in ways which reproduce gender inequality and privilege men over women in terms of wealth, status and influence.

One of the main problems posed by the study of gender and stratification is whether we can understand gender inequalities today in terms of class divisions. Inequalities of gender are more deep-rooted historically than class systems; men have superior standing to women

even in hunter-gatherer societies, where there are no distinct classes. Yet class divisions are so fundamental to modern capitalist societies that they 'overlap' substantially with gender inequalities. The material position of most women tends to reflect that of their fathers or male partners, and it can be argued that gender inequalities can still be explained, at least in part, in class terms.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

9.2 'Disidentifying' with the working class?

Bourdieu's work on class and status distinctions has been highly influential, and many sociologists have drawn on it in their own studies of social class. One notable example is the British sociologist Beverley Skeggs, who used Bourdieu's account of class and culture to examine the formation of class and gender in her study of women in North-West England.

Over a twelve-year period, Skeggs (1997) followed the lives of eighty-three working-class women who had all enrolled, at some point, in a course for carers at a local further education college. Following Bourdieu's terminology, Skeggs found that the women she studied possessed low economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital. They were poorly paid, had limited success in formal education and few relationships with people in powerful positions that they could draw upon; they also possessed low status in the eyes of higher social classes. Skeggs argues that this lack of capital reflects the wider lack of positive identities for working-class women in the UK. Working-class men, by contrast, do not have the same difficulty gaining a positive identity, and Skeggs suggests this has often been provided through participation in the trade union movement. For women, therefore, to be called 'working class' is to be labelled dirty, valueless and potentially dangerous.

It is this theoretical background, Skeggs argues, that explains why the women in her study were so reluctant to describe themselves as working class. They were well aware of cultural jibes aimed at working-class women about 'white stilettos', 'Sharons' and 'Traceys'. In the interviews, Skeggs found that the women tended to 'disidentify' with a perception of themselves as working class. When discussing sexuality, for example, they were keen to avoid the accusation that they were 'tarty', which would devalue the limited capital they did possess as young, marriageable women. It was

important among the group that they were sexually desirable and could 'get a man' if they wanted to. Marriage offered the best chance of respectability and responsibility. The choice to pursue a course in caring emphasized these concerns: training to be a carer taught the women good parenting and offered the possibility of respectable paid work over unemployment after qualification.

Although the women tried to disidentify with a view of themselves as working class and often saw class as of marginal importance in their lives, Skeggs argues it is actually fundamental to the way they lived, and their attempts to distance themselves from a working-class identity made it even more so. Skeggs's account of the lives of a group of women in North-West England shows how class is closely interlinked with other forms of identity – in this case, gender.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Given the gap between the women's understanding and that of the sociologist, is this a case of a sociologist treating 'ordinary people' as 'cultural dopes' who unconsciously follow social norms to reproduce social divisions (Garfinkel 1963)? What practical steps could the sociologist take to enhance the validity of her conclusions?

Determining women's class position

The view that class inequalities govern gender stratification was an unstated research assumption until the late twentieth century. Feminist critiques and the undeniable changes in women's economic position in the developed countries made this an issue for debate. Similarly, work on the intersecting of various forms of inequality has called into question all ideas of class as the master status that overrides all other forms of identity. Understanding the complex intertwining of inequality and social status has become an important part of sociological research on stratification today.

The 'conventional position' in class analysis was that women's paid work is relatively insignificant compared with that of men, so we can

assume that women are effectively in the same class as their fathers, male partners or husbands (Goldthorpe 1983). According to Goldthorpe, whose own class scheme was originally predicated on this assumption, this is not sexist. On the contrary, it is a recognition of the subordinate position in which most women find themselves. Women are more likely to have part-time jobs than men and to have an intermittent experience of paid employment, because they are forced to withdraw for lengthy periods to bear and care for children or to look after relatives.

See chapter 17, 'Work and Employment', for more about the differences between the working patterns of women and men.

Goldthorpe's position and the EGP schema have been criticized on several grounds. First, in a substantial number of households, the income of women, even if lower than that of male partners, is essential to maintaining the family's economic position and lifestyle. If so, then women's paid employment, in part, determines the class position of the household and cannot be discounted. Second, a woman's occupation may set the social class for the household, even when she earns less than her partner or husband. This could be the case where the man is an unskilled or semi-skilled worker and the woman is the manager of an office or shop. Third, in 'cross-class' households – where the work of the man is in a different category from that of the woman – it may be more realistic to treat men and women as being in different class positions. Fourth, the proportion of households in which women are sole breadwinners is increasing, and here women are, by definition, the determining influence on the class position of the household, except in cases where child maintenance payments put a woman on the same economic level as her ex-partner/husband (Stanworth 1984; Walby 1986).

Goldthorpe and others have defended the conventional position against the critics, but some important changes have been incorporated into the EGP classification. For research purposes, the partner in the higher class position can now be used to classify a household, whether that person is a man or a woman. Rather than assuming a 'male breadwinner', household classification is now determined by what is called the 'dominant breadwinner'. Furthermore, class III in the EGP scheme has been divided into two subcategories to reflect the preponderance of women in low-level, white-collar work. When the scheme is applied to women, class IIIb – non-manual workers in sales and services – is treated as class VII. This is seen as a more accurate representation of the position of unskilled and semi-skilled women in the labour market.

The impact of women's employment on class divisions

The entry of women into paid employment has had a significant impact on household incomes. But this impact has been experienced unevenly and may be accentuating class divisions between households. A growing number of women are moving into professional and managerial positions and earning high salaries, contributing to a polarization between high-income 'dual-earner households' and 'single-earner' or 'no-earner' households.

Research has shown that high-earning women tend to have high-earning partners, and that the wives of men in professional and managerial occupations have higher earnings than other employed female partners. Therefore, marriage tends to produce partnerships where both individuals are relatively privileged or disadvantaged in terms of occupational attainment (Bonney 1992). The impact of dual-earner partnerships is heightened by the fact that the average childbearing age is rising, particularly among professional women. The growing number of dual-earner, childless couples is fuelling a widening gap between the highest and lowest paid households.

Social mobility

Scholars of stratification study not just the differences between economic position or occupations but also what happens to the individuals who occupy them. The term 'social mobility' refers to the movement of individuals and groups between socio-economic positions. Vertical mobility means movement up or down the socio-economic scale. Those who gain in property, income or status are said to be *upwardly mobile*, while those who move in the opposite direction are *downwardly mobile*. In modern societies there is also a great deal of lateral mobility, which refers to geographical movement between neighbourhoods, towns or regions. Vertical and lateral mobility are often combined – for instance, where someone working in a company in one city is promoted to a higher position in a branch of the firm located in another town, or even in a different country.

There are, broadly, two ways of studying social mobility. First, we can look at individual careers – how far people move up or down the social scale in the course of their working lives. This is called intragenerational mobility. Alternatively, we can analyse how far children enter the same type of occupation as their parents or grandparents. Mobility across generations is called intergenerational mobility.

Comparative mobility studies

The amount of vertical mobility in a society is a major index of its 'openness', indicating how far talented individuals born into lower strata can move up the socio-economic ladder. In this respect, social mobility is a political issue, particularly in societies committed to the liberal vision of equality of opportunity for all. But how 'open' are the industrialized countries?

Studies of social mobility cover a period of more than fifty years and frequently involve international comparisons. An important early study was conducted in America by Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan (1967). Theirs remains the most detailed investigation of social

mobility yet carried out in a single country, though, as with most others in this field, all the subjects were men, reinforcing the point that social mobility studies lack gender balance.

Young adults today enjoy a higher material standard of living than their grandparents at a similar age, including car-ownership, foreign holidays, more disposable income and, despite a recent reversal of the trend due to the 2008 financial crisis, home-ownership.

Blau and Duncan collected information on a national sample of 20,000 males. They concluded that there was much vertical mobility in the USA, but nearly all of this was between occupational positions quite close to one another. 'Long-range' mobility was found to be rare. Although downward movement did occur, both within the careers of individuals and intergenerationally, it was much less common than upward mobility. The reason is that the numbers of white-collar and professional jobs have grown much more rapidly than blue-collar ones, creating new openings for the sons of blue-collar workers to move into white-collar positions. Blau and Duncan emphasized the importance of education and training on an individual's chances for success. In their view, upward social mobility is characteristic of industrial societies as a whole and contributes to their stability and social integration.

Global society 9.2 Is inequality declining in class-based societies?

There is some evidence that, at least until recently, the class systems in mature capitalist societies were increasingly open to movement between classes, thereby reducing the level of inequality. In 1955, the Nobel Prize-winning economist Simon Kuznets proposed a hypothesis that has since been called the Kuznets Curve: a formula showing that inequality increases during the early stages of capitalist development, then declines, and eventually stabilizes at a relatively low level (Kuznets 1955; figure 9.3).

Studies of European countries, the United States and Canada suggested that inequality peaked in these places before the Second World War, declined through the 1950s, and remained roughly the same through the 1970s (Berger 1986; Nielsen 1994). Lowered post-war inequality was the result in part of economic expansion in industrial societies, which created opportunities for people at the bottom to move up, and also of government health insurance, welfare and other programmes, which aimed to reduce inequality. However, Kuznets's prediction may well turn out to apply only to industrial societies. The emergence of the post-industrial society has brought with it an increase in inequality in many developed nations since the 1970s (see chapter 6), which calls into question Kuznets's theory.
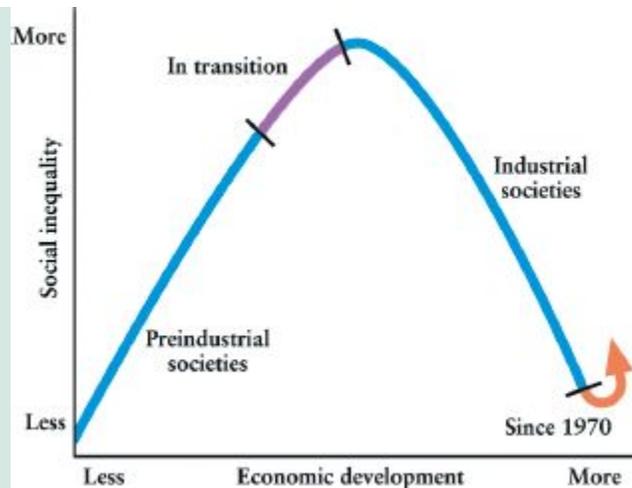
Figure 9.3 The Kuznets Curve

Source: Nielsen (1994).

Perhaps the most celebrated *international* study of social mobility was carried out by Seymour Martin Lipset and Reinhard Bendix (1959). They analysed data from nine industrialized societies – Britain, France, West Germany, Sweden, Switzerland, Japan, Denmark, Italy and the United States – concentrating on the mobility of men from blue-collar into white-collar work. Contrary to their expectations, they discovered no evidence that the United States was more open than European societies. Total vertical mobility across the blue-collar–white-collar line was 30 per cent in the United States, with the other societies varying between 27 and 31 per cent. Lipset and Bendix concluded that all the industrialized countries experienced similar changes in their occupational structure, which led to an 'upward surge of mobility' of comparable dimensions in all of them. However, some have questioned their findings, arguing that significant differences between countries are found if more attention is given to downward mobility and if long-range mobility is also considered (Heath 1981; Grusky and Hauser 1984).

Most studies of social mobility have focused on the 'objective' dimensions of mobility – that is, how much mobility exists, in which directions and for which sections of the population. Marshall and Firth (1999) took a different approach in their comparative study of social mobility, investigating people's 'subjective' feelings about changing

class positions. The authors designed their research in response to what they call 'unsubstantiated speculation' among sociologists about the likely effects of social mobility on an individual's sense of well-being. While some have argued that social mobility produces a sense of disequilibrium and isolation, others have taken a more optimistic view, suggesting that a gradual process of adaptation to the new class location takes place.

Using survey data from ten countries – Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Estonia, Germany, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, the USA and the UK – Marshall and Firth examined whether class mobility was linked to a heightened sense of satisfaction or dissatisfaction in relation to family, community, work, income and politics. On the whole, they found little evidence of an association between class experience and overall life satisfaction. This was true for both upwardly and downwardly mobile individuals.

Downward mobility

Although downward mobility is less common than upward mobility, it is still a widespread phenomenon. Downward intragenerational mobility is also common. Mobility of this type is quite often associated with psychological problems and anxieties, where individuals become unable to sustain the lifestyles to which they have become accustomed. Redundancy is a main source of downward mobility. Middle-aged people who lose their jobs can find it hard to gain new employment or can obtain work only at a lower level of income than before.

Thus far, there have been few studies of downward mobility in the UK. However, it is probable that, in both inter- and intragenerational terms, it is increasing in Britain, as it is in the United States. In the USA over the 1980s and early 1990s, for the first time since the Second World War, there was a general downturn in the average real earnings (earnings after adjusting for inflation) of people in middle-level, white-collar jobs. Thus, even if such jobs continue to expand relative to others, they may not support the lifestyle aspirations they once did.

Corporate restructuring and 'downsizing' are the main reasons for these changes. In the face of increasing global competition, continuing

automation, robotics and artificial intelligence, and as a result of the 2008 global recession, many companies cut their workforces. White-collar as well as full-time blue-collar jobs have been lost, many replaced by relatively poorly paid, part-time occupations and short-term contracts. Downward mobility is particularly common among divorced or separated women with children, who often find themselves in a more precarious situation than men as they try to juggle work, childcare and domestic responsibilities (Kurz 2013).

Social mobility in Britain

Overall levels of mobility have been extensively studied in Britain over the post-war period, and there is a wealth of empirical evidence and research studies on the British case. For this reason, in this section we will look at UK evidence, remembering that, until very recently, virtually all of this research concentrated on the experience of men.

One important early study was directed by David Glass (1954). Glass's work analysed intergenerational mobility for a long period up to the 1950s. His findings correspond to those noted above in respect of international data, with around 30 per cent mobility from blue-collar into white-collar jobs. On the whole, he concluded that Britain was not a particularly 'open' society. While a good deal of mobility occurred, most of it was short range. Upward mobility was much more common than downward mobility and was concentrated at the middle levels of the class structure. People at the bottom tended to stay there, while almost 50 per cent of sons of workers in professional and managerial jobs were in similar occupations as their fathers. Glass also found a high degree of 'self-recruitment' into the elite positions within society.

Another important piece of research – the Oxford Mobility Study – was carried out by Goldthorpe and his colleagues (1987 [1980]), based on findings from a 1972 survey. They investigated how far patterns of social mobility had changed since Glass's work and concluded that the overall level of mobility of men was in fact higher, with more long-range movement. The main reason for this was not that British society had become more egalitarian but on account of the acceleration in the growth of higher white-collar jobs relative to blue-collar ones. The

researchers found that about two-thirds of the sons of unskilled or semi-skilled manual workers were themselves in manual occupations. About 30 per cent of professionals and managers were of working-class origin, while 4 per cent of men in blue-collar work were from professional or managerial backgrounds. Despite finding higher rates of absolute social mobility in Britain, the Oxford Mobility Study concluded that the relative chances for mobility remained highly unequal, and that inequalities of opportunity remained squarely grounded within the class structure.

The original Oxford study was updated on the basis of new material collected about ten years later (Goldthorpe and Payne 1986). The major findings of the earlier work were corroborated, but some new developments were found. The chances of men from blue-collar backgrounds getting professional or managerial jobs, for example, had increased. Once again this was traced to changes in the occupational structure, producing a reduction in blue-collar occupations relative to higher white-collar jobs. Such findings reinforce the argument that much social mobility is generated by structural shifts in the economy rather than increasing equality of opportunity.

One of the key findings of the Essex Mobility Study (Marshall et al. 1988) was that the scales were still tilted against women, whose mobility chances are hampered by their over-representation in routine non-manual jobs. The fluid character of modern societies derives mainly from their propensity to upgrade occupations. The study concluded that 'More "room at the top" has not been accompanied by great equality in the opportunities to get there' (1988: 138). However, we should bear in mind that social mobility is a long-term process, and, when society is becoming more 'open', the full effects may not be seen for a generation.
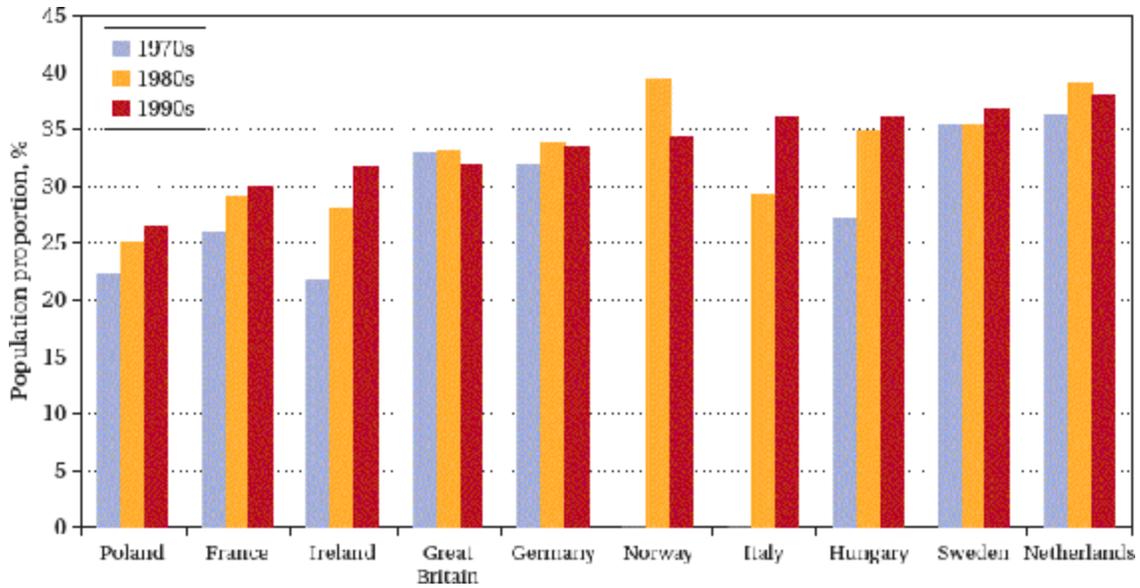
Figure 9.4 Absolute (intergenerational) social mobility in selected countries, men (proportion of men getting better jobs than their parents)

Source: National Equality Panel (2010: 323).
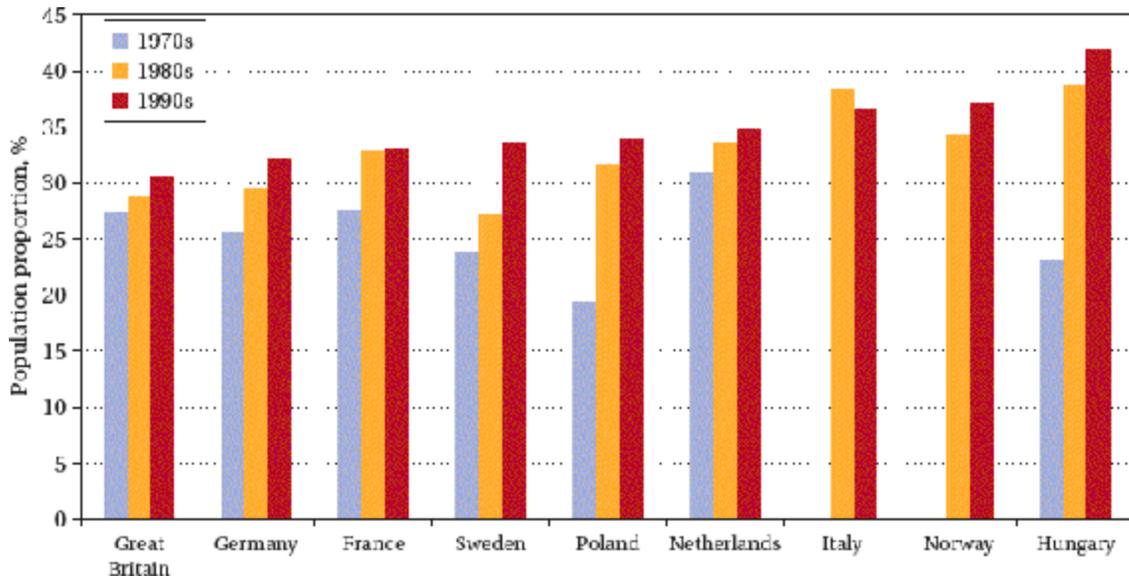
Figure 9.5 Absolute (intergenerational) social mobility in selected countries, women (proportion of women getting better jobs than their parents)

Source: National Equality Panel (2010: 323).

A study by Jo Blanden et al. (2002) at the London School of Economics found a reversal of this process, comparing intergenerational mobility in Britain between two groups, the first born in March 1958 and the second in April 1970. Even though the age difference between the people involved was only twelve years, the study documented a sharp fall in intergenerational mobility between them. The economic status of the group born in 1970 was more strongly connected to the economic status of their parents than the group born in 1958. The authors suggested that one of the reasons for the fall in intergenerational mobility from the earlier to the later group was that the general rise in educational attainment from the late 1970s onwards benefited children of the wealthy more than children of the less well-off.

More recently, Jackson and Goldthorpe (2007) studied intergenerational class mobility in the UK by comparing previous and more recent datasets. While they found no evidence that intergenerational mobility was falling in an absolute sense, there was some indication of a decline in long-range mobility. The authors found a generally less favourable balance between downward and upward mobility emerging for men, which is the product of structural class change. They concluded that there can be no return to the rising rates of upward mobility experienced in the mid-twentieth century.

In 2010, the UK government's National Equality Panel reported on the current state of economic inequality in Britain. They found that absolute (intergenerational) upward social mobility had changed little since the 1970s. But, when parental income is included, upward mobility for men fell in the 1990s and is lower than that in most other European countries, while women's mobility shows a gradual improvement since the 1970s (figures 9.4 and 9.5). However, the rate of increase for women is also at the bottom of the range internationally. The report concludes that the main reason for these relatively low levels of social mobility is that Britain has a high level of social inequality. This matters, the authors say, because 'moving up a ladder is harder if the rungs are further apart … It matters more in Britain who your parents are than in many other countries' (National Equality Panel 2010: 329–30).

In its 2019 report, the UK's Social Mobility Commission said that occupational mobility had stagnated since 2015 in spite of government interventions (Social Mobility Commission 2019). In particular, people from more advantaged families were almost 80 per cent more likely to be in a professional job than those from working-class backgrounds. Downward mobility was more likely for people from minority ethnic groups and for women, while just 21 per cent of working-class people with disabilities make it into the highest occupations (ibid.: 1).

As we saw in the chapter's opening example, more advantaged social groups are more likely to create a glass floor, preventing their children falling into low-paid work. The commission reported that just 16 per cent of those from professional families move 'downwards' into working-class jobs. This has been seen as demonstrating the existence of a sticky ceiling. That is, it is much more likely that those born into wealthier and professional families at the top of the income scale will stay there for a long time, thus reducing the opportunities for social mobility from below (OECD 2018: 3). More than sixty years after David Glass's research, these findings demonstrate that Britain is still 'not a particularly "open" society' and shows how firmly established its class boundaries are.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Advantaged social class groups are able to prevent their children from falling into low-paid jobs. Is it desirable for governments to take steps to stop them doing this? If it was, what practical legislative measures and social policies could be introduced to bring it about?

Gender and social mobility

Although the bulk of research into social mobility has conventionally focused on men, more attention is now paid to patterns of mobility among women. At a time when girls are outperforming boys in school and females are outnumbering males in higher education, it is tempting to conclude that longstanding gender inequalities may be relaxing their

hold. Has the occupational structure become more 'open' to women, or are their mobility chances still guided largely by family and social background?

See chapter 16, 'Education', for a more detailed discussion of higher education.

An important cohort study funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), published as *Twenty-Something in the 1990s* (Bynner et al. 1997), traced the lives of 9,000 Britons born during the same week in 1970. In 1996, it was found that, for both men and women at the age of twenty-six, family background and class of origin remained powerful influences. The study concluded that the young people who coped best with the transition to adulthood were those who had obtained a better education, postponed children and marriage, and had fathers in professional occupations. Individuals who had come from disadvantaged backgrounds tended to remain there.

The study also found that, on the whole, women have more opportunities than their counterparts in the previous generation. Middle-class women have benefited most from the shifts described above: they are just as likely as their male peers to go to university and to move into well-paid jobs on graduation. The trend towards greater equality is also reflected in women's heightened confidence and self-esteem compared with those of a similar cohort of women born just twelve years earlier.

PARLIAMENTS

- 32% UK House of Commons
- 26% UK House of Lords
- 43% National Assembly for Wales
- 36% Scottish Parliament
- 30% NI Assembly
- 41% European Parliament
- 33% Select Committee Chairs

... AND POLITICS

- 26% Cabinet Ministers
- 33% All Ministers
- 23% Cabinet Committees
- 50% Shadow Cabinet
- 16% Privy Council
- 25% Government Special Advisors
- 24% Think Tank Directors
- 31% Lobby Journalists

LOCAL REPRESENTATIVES

- 33% Local Councillors (England and Wales)
- 18% Police and Crime Commissioners
- 0% Metro Mayors
- 40% London Assembly

% Women % Men

PUBLIC SERVANTS

- 31% Civil Service Perm Secs
- 40% Senior Civil Service
- 33% Local Council Chief Executives
- 49% Public Appointments
- 11% Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee

JUDICIARY

- 17% Supreme Court Justices
- 22% High Court Judges

EDUCATION AND HEALTH

- 26% University Vice Chancellors
- 38% Secondary Headteachers
- 43% NHS Trust CEOs

ARTS AND THE MEDIA

- 18% National Newspaper Editors
- 21% Regional Newspaper Editors
- 74% Magazine Editors
- 16% British Film Directors
- 32% Cast in British Films

BUSINESS

- 6% CEOs of FTSE 100 Companies
- 26% Directors of FTSE 100 Companies
- 23% LEP Board Members
- 34% Trade Union General Secretaries

CHARITIES AND CIVIL SOCIETY

- 28% Charity CEOs
- 35% Chairs of Professional Bodies
- 30% CEOs of Professional Bodies

SPORT

- 15% Sport Governing Body Chairs
- 26% Sport Governing Body CEOs

HISTORY

- 22% Museum and Gallery Chairs
- 34% Museum and Gallery Directors
- 25% Faces on Bank Notes
- 5% Statues (historical, non-royal)

Figure 9.6 Percentage of women in powerful positions, 2018

Source: Jewell and Bazeley (2018: 3).

As [figure 9.6](#) shows, women are moving into some of the high-status positions in British society, just as they are in other developed countries. Yet, in 2018, a roughly equal gender balance was apparent in only two areas of public life: appointments to public bodies and in the Shadow Cabinet. Women made up just 22 per cent of high court judges, 26 per cent of university vice-chancellors, 6 per cent of FTSE 100 company CEOs and 18 per cent of national newspaper editors (Jewell and Bazeley 2018: 2–3). One way of expressing this change is to say that women have cracked the 'glass ceiling', but, as yet, it has not been shattered.

Women's chances of gaining a good career are also improving, but two major obstacles remain. Male managers and employers have been found still to discriminate against women applicants. They do so, at least partly, because of a belief that women are not really interested in careers and are likely to leave when they start a family. Having children does indeed have a significant effect on the career chances of women. This is not because they are uninterested in a career; rather, they are effectively forced to choose between a career and having children. This is on account of the fact that men are rarely willing to share full responsibility for domestic work and childcare. And, though more women than before are organizing their domestic lives in order to pursue a career, this is still a challenging situation.

Meritocracy and the persistence of social class

Peter Saunders (1990, 1996, 2010) is one of the most vocal critics of the whole British tradition of social mobility research encompassing most of the studies described above. For Saunders, Britain really is a meritocratic society, because the biggest rewards go to those who 'perform' and achieve. In his view, intelligence, ability and effort are the key factors in occupational success, not class background. Saunders (1996) used empirical data from the National Child Development Study to show that children who are bright and hard-working succeed regardless of their social advantages or disadvantages. Britain may be an unequal society, he argues, but it is a fair one. This conclusion may well be a widely held assumption among the populations of developed countries.

In response, Breen and Goldthorpe (1999) criticized Saunders on theoretical and methodological grounds. They accuse him of introducing bias into his analysis of the survey data, such as excluding respondents who were unemployed. Breen and Goldthorpe provide an alternative analysis of the same data, arriving at radically different conclusions, showing that there are significant class barriers to social mobility. They concede that individual merit is a contributory factor in determining class position but maintain that 'class of origin' remains a powerful influence. They argue that children from disadvantaged backgrounds must show more merit than those who are advantaged if they are to acquire a similar class position.

A later international and comparative study of inequality and social mobility, by Andrews and Leigh (2009), also takes issue with Saunders's claim that societies can be both unequal and fair. Their empirical survey used occupational data on men aged twenty-five to fifty-four in sixteen countries around the world (excluding the UK), concentrating on the comparative earnings of fathers and their sons. Their main conclusion was that 'Sons who grew up in more unequal countries in the 1970s were less likely to have experienced social

mobility by 1999' (ibid.: 1491–2). In unequal societies around the world, there is less social mobility, and the movement from 'rags to riches' becomes much more difficult for those who start from the lower positions. Thus, inequality actually seems to impede 'fair' outcomes (based on ability and effort), and in order to move to a genuine [meritocracy](#) it will be necessary to reduce inequality.

However, inequality between the poor and the more affluent has actually expanded in Britain and elsewhere, and concerns continue to grow about the impact of wealth concentration at the very top of the social hierarchy. Is increasing class inequality a price that has to be paid to secure a more general economic development? Since the 1980s, the pursuit of wealth has been seen as generating economic development because it is a motivating force encouraging innovation and ambition. Today many argue that globalization and the deregulation of economic markets have led to a widening of the gap between rich and poor and a 'hardening' of class inequalities.

People's lives are never completely determined by class position, and people do experience social mobility. The expansion of higher education, the growing accessibility of professional qualifications, and the emergence of the internet and the 'new economy' all present important new channels for upward mobility. Such developments may further erode old class and stratification patterns, contributing to a more fluid social order.

Yet, as the UK Social Mobility Commission put it (2019: 19), 'Ultimately, class plays an outsized role in a person's ability to move up the income and jobs ladder, and there has been no measurable improvement in recent years … Across every measure of social mobility – income mobility, occupational mobility and standards of living – there are persistent gaps in access that link to class.' Although the traditional hold of class-based identities may be weakening as multiple sources of identification and consumer culture have become more significant, class divisions remain at the heart of material inequalities and unequal life chances.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. List the key features of the stratification systems of social class, caste and estates. How do class systems differ from the other two?

2. What is meant by the concept of 'modern' slavery? How is this similar to and different from traditional forms of slavery?

3. Discuss Marx's theory of class and class conflict. What criticisms have been levelled at this theory?

4. What does Max Weber mean by 'status' and 'party' in relation to stratification? Explain which aspects of Marx's and Weber's schemes may be compatible and where they are antagonistic.

5. What is an occupational class scheme? What do these schemes help to explain and what do they omit or underplay in our understanding of the dynamics of class?

6. The upper class is a small minority that enjoys significant advantages. What are these advantages? Does the upper class wield real power in society or are its members just very wealthy?

7. List some occupations considered 'middle class' today. What is required to gain access into these and why has the middle class expanded rapidly since the mid-twentieth century?

8. What do sociologists mean by 'the working class'? What social and economic factors account for the shrinking of this class from the mid-twentieth century?

9. Describe the main elements attributed to 'the underclass'. What does the concept of the underclass capture that 'poverty' does not? Why do sociologists today consider the developing underclass to be a flawed thesis?

10. Lifestyles and consumerism have been seen as important influences on class position. Provide some evidence in support of this view. Is social class now an outdated concept?

11. What is meant by intragenerational and intergenerational social mobility? What evidence is there that mobility of both types is reducing today? The position of women has conventionally not been part of mobility studies. Why not?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

Sociologists have long studied social mobility within class systems in the developed societies. Until quite recently the bulk of this research has focused on the issue of 'upward' mobility and whether individuals from working-class groups are more or less likely to move up the occupational class system than in the past. Issues of downward mobility have become of more interest as previously middle-class occupations have been recategorized and traditional employment patterns have changed significantly. The article below examines the persistent correlation between class origins and the chances of social mobility. Read it and answer the questions.

1. What is the sample population for this analysis and how has it been accessed? How would you characterize the research?

2. Explain what the authors mean by 'glass ceilings' and glass floors'?

3. The paper does not measure social mobility in terms of income levels. How does it measure mobility and what benefits are claimed for this approach?

4. What conclusions are drawn from the statistical analysis regarding the impact of 'parental help' on the mobility of children?

5. What does the article tell us about the direct effects of educational attainment in later life? Does the evidence from this paper support the idea that Britain is an educationbased, meritocratic society?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

May 2018 saw the 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth, marked by numerous articles and commentaries on television, in newspapers and online, covering the legacy of Marx and his ideas. For some, Marx's studies of capitalism continue to inform our understanding today. For others, he was a dogmatic ideologue whose ideas deserve to be in the dustbin of history.

Read the following two short online articles. The first, by Russell Berman, published by the Hoover Institution, provides a swingeing critique of Marx's ideas and their deleterious impact in the twentieth century. A variety of totalitarian 'Marxist' regimes terrorized their own populations, killing many millions of people, something Berman argues flowed from Marx's own conviction that he had found 'the truth of history': 'Marx channels a voice of infallibility, making sweeping claims with no margin of error and no exploration of evidence.' And in the wake of contemporary anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements, Berman says that 'it is astonishing that Marx continues to be a popular figure' (www.hoover.org/research/200-marx-still-wrong).

The second piece is an extract from a 2011 book by Terry Eagleton explaining why Marx was essentially right about the dynamics of capitalism and its direction of travel. In it, he looks to correct some common misunderstandings about Marx's ideas on capitalist development and social revolution. For example, he notes that the idea of 'socialism in one country', which characterized Stalin's Soviet Union, was never part of Marx's thesis. Hence, 'To judge socialism by its results in one desperately isolated country would be like drawing conclusions about the human race from a study of psychopaths in Kalamazoo' (https://yalebooksblog.co.uk/2018/05/01/why-marx-was-right-by-terry-eagleton-an-extract/).

Write a 1,000-word essay explaining why Marx's key ideas, especially on class and class conflict, remain influential today. Also discuss why the revolution Marx sought has not occurred and whether, given what

we now know about class systems, it is likely ever to take place in the future.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

The British artist Grayson Perry has long been interested in the subject of taste – why do some people like certain types of music, TV programmes, furnishings or clothes, while others shun those same things, preferring other cultural markers as expressions of their personality and status? In particular, and as Bourdieu's detailed studies illustrate, there is much evidence of a clear connection between social classes and patterns of taste, a connection which Perry investigates in his work. The paradox of taste is that, despite perceiving our choices as purely personal and an expression of our individuality, in fact these 'choices' are influenced, even shaped, by our social class position.

Do some research into Grayson Perry's artwork in this area, including his three-part TV series on Channel 4 (UK), 'All in the Best Possible Taste' (2012), and his six tapestries 'The Vanity of Small Differences' (2012) – available from the Arts Council Collection (https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/QQDKD3VO). Inspired by William Hogarth's *A Rake's Progress* in the eighteenth century, which charts the life of Tom Rakewell as he moves through the class system, 'Vanity' also explores class and aesthetic taste in three locations across Britain.

Perry describes this work as 'a safari amongst the taste tribes of Britain'. Analyse each of the six tapestries, noting 'Tim's' journey from the working class, through the middle class and into the upper class. List all of the items featured and the representations of relationships which Perry uses to illustrate the tensions and conflicts (both internal and external) faced by individuals who take this route. What might this work add to what we already know from sociological findings on social mobility? Can sociological research methods match Perry's ability to tap into the *experience and emotional impact* of social mobility?

Further reading

A good place to start is with Will Atkinson's (2015) *Class* (Cambridge: Polity), which is an engaging introduction to contemporary debates. For the British experience of class, Mike Savage and colleagues' (2015) *Social Class in the 21st Century* (London: Pelican Books) is an up-to-date review of the evidence and trends from the BBC's

Great British Class Survey. Erzsébet Bukodi and John H. Goldthorpe's (2018) *Social Mobility and Education: Research, Policy and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) is a very interesting and thoughtful book on mobility in Britain.

Lucinda Platt's (2019) *Understanding Inequalities: Stratification and Difference* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity) is a well-balanced, broader discussion of inequalities and stratification, and Kath Woodward's edited collection (2005) *Questioning Identity: Gender, Class, Ethnicity* (Abingdon: Routledge) is also very good, with chapters on the main social divisions. Sam Friedman and Daniel Laurison's (2019) *The Glass Ceiling: Why it Pays to Be Privileged* (Bristol: Policy Press) is a fascinating look at the mechanics of privilege and its consequences for social mobility.

For a collection of original readings on social inequalities, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Social Inequality and Classes – many useful links from Sociosite at the University of Amsterdam:
www.sociosite.net/topics/inequality.php#CLASS

Analysis of the BBC's Great British Class Survey – results from this survey as well as readers' comments:
www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34766169

Social Mobility Foundation – a UK charity promoting social mobility for young people from low-income backgrounds:
www.socialmobility.org.uk/

Marxists Internet Archive – guess what? Exactly what it says: all things Marx and Marxism:
www.marxists.org/

BBC Working Class Britain – visual and audio materials on the history of British working-class life:
www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p015z5wc

CHAPTER 10

HEALTH, ILLNESS AND DISABILITY

CONTENTS

An increasing number of men now suffer from eating disorders, which have conventionally been seen as an exclusively female health problem.

Only women get eating disorders, don't they? In a 2014 UK research project using a series of qualitative interviews, male participants told researchers that, before they developed an eating disorder, this was indeed their belief. One participant thought that eating disorders affected 'fragile teenage girls who are very emotional' and not 'one of the lads' or rugby players such as him. One thought that eating disorders were 'something girls got' and another participant said: 'I thought I made it up myself … you know, something that only I did, you know, I never thought in a million years this was something that lots of people did, and deliberately did to cause damage to themselves. You know, it wouldn't have crossed my mind' (Räisänen and Hunt 2014: 3). Why do many people still see eating disorders, particularly those linked to radical weight loss and an avoidance or fear of food, as a specifically female problem?

What we now call anorexia nervosa was originally labelled in 1873 by Sir William Gull as 'anorexia hysterica', and the condition was thought

to be restricted to women, especially young women (Goldstein et al. 2016). For example, it was suggested that a fear of food and other disorders could be linked to the cessation of menstruation, which precluded an anorexia diagnosis in males. The idea that boys and men could suffer from eating disorders, such as anorexia or bulimia, was literally 'unthinkable' then. The lack of systematic academic research into male eating disorders until the late twentieth century shows that gendered assumptions persisted for over a century.

Today there are differing estimates of the prevalence of eating disorders in males – anywhere between 10 and 25 per cent in most studies (though some suggest as high as 40 per cent) (Delderfield 2018). What most researchers do agree on is that fewer men develop eating disorders than women, but the number is increasing, and men are 'underdiagnosed and undertreated'. Gaining accurate estimates of prevalence has proved difficult, not least because anorexia and bulimia are still widely perceived as women's illnesses and men may be more reluctant to admit suffering from them (Corson and Andersen 2002).

> ## THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Some suggest that the movement towards gender equality is likely to lead to more eating disorders among *young men*. Why would this be so? What more can be done to encourage men to acknowledge that eating disorders are not a specifically female problem?

It may seem that eating disorders have purely biological or physiological causes, but this is not correct. In fact several risk factors have been identified: abuse or another severe event, an existing mental health issue, familial substance abuse, and personality traits such as low self-esteem or perfectionism (Räisänen and Hunt 2014: 1). An expanding body of research has also shown that social pressure to achieve a slim, 'attractive' body is significant and that eating disorders are every bit as sociological and psychological as they are biological. As the pace of globalization increased during the 1980s and 1990s, similar issues surfaced among young, primarily affluent women in Hong Kong and Singapore, as well as urban areas of Taiwan, China, the Philippines, India and Pakistan (Efron 1997). An increasing incidence has also been

reported in Argentina, Mexico, Brazil, South Africa, South Korea, Turkey, Iran and the United Arab Emirates (Nasser 2006). The proliferation of eating disorders appears to follow the spread of modern lifestyles around the world (S. Lee 2001).

Despite increasing numbers of men presenting with eating disorders, the question remains as to why it is primarily women that are affected. One reason is that social norms stress the importance of physical attractiveness more for women than for men, and these images proliferate in social media, magazines and newspapers, online gaming, television and film. Although men *are* increasingly presented in media forms and marketing as sex objects and fit, attractive bodies, such images tend to combine muscularity and leanness. As traditional male jobs have become scarcer and service-sector jobs have rapidly expanded, muscularity remains a potent symbol of masculinity, while the individual body is an aspect of life over which men still have control (Elliott and Elliott 2005: 4).

Drawing on the diaries of American girls over the last two centuries, Brumberg (1997) found that, for adolescent girls in the USA, personal identity was closely tied to body shape. Young American women and girls, like their counterparts elsewhere, are subject to routine media representations of idealized, thin female bodies. Although women play a much larger part in society than a century ago, they are still judged as much by their appearance as by their achievements. As a result, women may feel anxious about people's perceptions of them and become focused on feelings about the body. Ideals of slimness can then become obsessive, and losing weight brings a sense of being in control.

This Rubens painting, *The Toilet of Venus*, completed around 1613, depicts Venus, the goddess of love and beauty – a very different image of female attractiveness from that of today.

Eating disorders demonstrate that a health issue which feels like a purely personal trouble – a problem with food or despair over one's appearance – turns out to be a public health issue. If we include not just anorexia and bulimia but also widespread dieting, rising levels of obesity and young people's concerns about bodily appearance, eating disorders are significant social problems for national health services.

Next, we move on to explore what is meant by 'health' and 'illness' and how the power of the medical profession is a key factor in defining these terms. After introducing the impact of globalization on health and disease transmission, we outline some key perspectives from the sociology of health and illness. From here we look at the social bases of health, such as social class, gender and ethnicity, and our final section discusses issues of disability and health, with a focus on how disabled people's movements have transformed the landscape and language of disability.

The sociology of health and illness

In numerous countries, a common interaction ritual when two friends meet is to ask, 'How are you?', with the expectation that the reply will be, 'Very well, thank you. And how are you?' Once it is established that both parties are healthy, social interaction and conversation can begin. But the obvious concept of health assumed in this habitual exchange is not so clear once we ask exactly what 'health' is and how we know we really are healthy. The sociology of health and illness has shown that health is every bit a social as it is a biological or psychological phenomenon.

Defining health

Sociologists studying the social meanings attributed to the concepts of health and illness have found several different versions, the main ones being health as the absence of illness, disease as deviance, health as balance and health as function (Blaxter 2010). We will outline these briefly in turn.

For much of the twentieth century, health and illness were seen as opposites. Health was simply *the absence of illness*. If we are not ill, then we must be healthy. The medical profession saw illness, especially long-term illness, as leading to 'biological disadvantage' by reducing the lifespan or individual fertility, while being healthy (without illness) was seen as the normal human condition. A closely related second definition is *illness as a form of deviance*, which requires monitoring and legitimization by medical professionals to prevent the disruption of society. Such definitions came to be seen as problematic because they suggest that what is in fact a highly unusual situation – the complete lack of any illness at all – is the norm against which illness is defined. Today there is a greater awareness that chronic illness is very widespread and that perhaps a majority of people have some form of illness, disease or impairment and yet still perceive themselves as normal and healthy, able to lead productive lives.

By contrast, many cultures around the world contain a belief that *health is a kind of balance*, both between the individual and their environment and within the individual organism. Modern scientific medicine has shown that the human body does, in fact, contain such homeostatic or 'self-regulating' elements, including regulation of the blood supply and triggering of the immune system when the body is attacked. Recent concern with the work–life balance in fast-moving societies also suggests that health can be promoted or damaged by the social environment. Although widespread, this definition has its critics. Not only is the idea of health-as-balance almost impossible to measure accurately, it is also highly subjective. Some people feel they have achieved a good, healthy balance in situations that others perceive as highly stressful and detrimental to their health. How can a general definition of health be distilled from such disparate experiences?

A fourth definition of health sees it as lying in people's ability to carry out their normal tasks. This is *health as function*. If individuals are able to perform the activities or functions that provide them with a good living, a satisfying life and enjoyable leisure time, then we can say they are healthy. But, if illness or injury interferes with their capacity to do these things, both the individual and society suffer. While this definition is initially attractive, the main problem is that people live very different lives and perform a range of very different activities. Some people are engaged in hard, physical work while others sit in comfortable, heated offices. Some enjoy paragliding and rock climbing and others visit museums and spend their leisure time gaming and web-surfing. Consequently, it is difficult to set down any universal concept of 'health' based on functional ability. Functional definitions of health have also been the subject of attacks from the disabled people's movement, as they are too individualistic and fail to appreciate that barriers erected by society's organization can 'disable' those with certain impairments (Blaxter 2010: 9).

An attempt at a more holistic definition of health combining social and biological aspects was devised in 1946 by the World Health Organization (WHO), which defined health as 'a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity' (WHO 2006b: 1). This comprehensive definition

offers a rounded account of what it means to be healthy, but it is open to the charge that it is too utopian to be helpful. However, it does offer the possibility of comparing health across social groups within a society, and between nations across the world, along each of the dimensions listed. It is then possible to devise policies and make interventions to improve the state of public health. The definition, which has remained unchanged since it was first published in 1948, remains the basis on which the WHO operates.

Nonetheless, in spite of these definitional problems and challenges, in practice there is one perspective on health and illness that has tended to dominate all others. This is the biomedical model originating within the medical profession and on which professional medicine has long been based. We examine this model later, but first we need a brief introduction to some of the main sociological perspectives in the study of health and illness.

Sociological perspectives on health and illness

Sociologists ask how illness is experienced and interpreted by the sick person and those with whom they come into contact. The patterns of everyday life are temporarily modified by illness and interactions with others become transformed. This is because the 'normal' functioning of the body is a vital, but often unnoticed, part of our lives. We depend on our bodies to operate as they should, and our very sense of self is predicated on the expectation that our bodies will facilitate, not impede, social interactions and daily activities.

Illness has both personal and public dimensions. When we become ill, not only do we experience pain, discomfort and confusion, but others are affected too. People in close contact may extend sympathy, care and support, or they may struggle to make sense of our illness or to find ways to incorporate it into the pattern of their own lives. Others with whom we come into contact may also react to illness, and their reactions help to shape our own interpretation, even posing a challenge to our sense of self.

Two ways of understanding the experience of illness have been particularly influential in sociological research. The first, associated with the functionalist school, sets out the norms of behaviour which individuals adopt when they are ill (see 'Classic studies' 10.1). The second perspective, favoured by symbolic interactionists, is the attempt to reveal the interpretations ascribed to illness and how these meanings influence people's actions and behaviour.

For more on functionalist theory, see chapter 1, 'What is Sociology?', and chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

[Classic studies 10.1](#) Talcott Parsons on society's 'sick role'

The research problem

Think of a time when you have been ill. How did other people react to you? Were they sympathetic? Did you feel they expected you to get better too quickly? The American theorist Talcott Parsons (1952) argued that illness has a clear social as well as an individual dimension. People are not only individually sick, they also have to learn what society expects of them when they are sick; and, if they fail to conform, they may be stigmatized as engaging in deviant behaviour.

" We're running a little behind, so I'd like each of you to ask yourself, 'Am I really that sick, or would I just be wasting the doctor's valuable time?'"

Parsons's explanation

Parsons argued that there exists a [sick role](#) – a concept he used to describe the patterns of behaviour which the sick person adopts in order to minimize the disruptive impact of illness on society. Functionalism holds that society usually operates in a smooth and consensual manner, but a sick person might not be able to perform their normal responsibilities or might be less reliable and efficient than usual. Because sick people are not able to carry out their

normal roles, the lives of those around them are disrupted: work tasks go unfinished, causing stress for co-workers, responsibilities at home are not fulfilled, and so on.

According to Parsons, people *learn* the sick role through socialization and enact it – with the cooperation of others – when they fall ill. There are three pillars of the sick role.

1. The sick person is not personally responsible for being sick. Illness is seen as the result of physical causes and the onset of illness is unrelated to the individual's actions.

2. The sick person is entitled to certain rights and privileges, including withdrawal from normal responsibilities, since they bear no responsibility for being ill. For example, they might be 'released' from normal duties around the home, and behaviour that is not as polite or thoughtful as usual is excused. They gain the right to take time off work.

3. The sick person must work to regain health by consulting a medical expert and agreeing to become a 'patient', so the sick role is a temporary and 'conditional' one, contingent on the sick person actively trying to get well. The patient is expected to cooperate and follow 'doctor's orders', but a sick person who refuses or does not heed medical advice puts the legitimacy of their sick role status in jeopardy.

Parsons's concept has been refined by later sociologists, who have found that the experience of the sick role varies with type of illness. Thus, the added rights and privileges which are part of the sick role may not be uniformly granted. Freidson (1970) identified three versions of the sick role, which correspond to different types and degrees of illness.

The *conditional* sick role applies to people affected by a temporary condition from which they can recover. For example, someone with bronchitis would reap more benefits than those with a common cold. The *unconditionally legitimate* sick role refers to individuals with incurable illnesses. Because the sick person cannot 'do' anything to get well, they are entitled to occupy the sick role in the

long term. The unconditionally legitimate role would apply to those affected by alopecia (hair loss) or severe acne. In both cases there are no special privileges, but an acknowledgement that the individual is not responsible for the illness. The onset of cancer or Parkinson's disease may result in important privileges and the right to abandon many or most duties.

The final sick role is the *illegitimate role*, which occurs when an individual has a disease or condition that is stigmatized by others. In such cases, there is a sense that the individual might somehow bear responsibility, and rights and privileges are not necessarily granted. Alcoholism, smoking-related illness and obesity are possible examples of stigmatized illnesses which affect a person's right to assume the sick role.

Critical points

Parsons's concept of the sick role has been very influential. It reveals clearly how the sick person is an integral part of their larger social context. But there are a number of important criticisms which can be levelled against it.

Some writers have argued that the sick role 'formula' is unable to capture the *experience* of being ill. Others point out that it cannot be applied universally. For example, it does not account for instances when doctors and patients disagree about a diagnosis or have opposing interests. Furthermore, taking on the sick role is not always a straightforward process. Some individuals have symptoms that are repeatedly misdiagnosed and are denied the sick role until a clear diagnosis is made. In other cases, social factors such as race, class and gender can affect whether, and how readily, the sick role is granted. In sum, the sick role cannot be divorced from the social, cultural and economic influences which surround it, and the realities of illness are more complex than the model suggests.

The increasing emphasis on lifestyle and health means that individuals are seen as bearing ever greater responsibility for their own well-being, which contradicts the first premise of the sick role – that individuals are not to blame for their illness. Moreover, in modern societies, the shift away from acute infectious disease

towards chronic illness has made the sick role less applicable. Whereas it has been useful in understanding acute illness, it is less useful today in the case of chronic illness, as there is no single role for chronically ill or disabled people to adopt.

Contemporary significance

The concept of a 'sick role' remains valuable as it allows us to link individual illness to wider healthcare systems. Bryan Turner (1995) argues that most societies *do* develop sick roles but that these differ. In Western societies, an individualized sick role exists, which means that hospital stays for non-life-threatening conditions are generally quite short, visiting hours are limited and the number of visitors is strictly controlled. However, in Japan, a more communal sick role is the norm. Patients tend to stay in hospital longer after their medical treatment is completed, and the average hospital stay is much longer than in Western societies. Hospital visits are also more informal, with family and friends often eating together and staying for longer periods. Turner's analysis shows that we can still learn much about the social aspects of health and illness from a comparative sociology of sick roles.

Illness as 'lived experience'

Many sociologists have applied a symbolic interactionist approach to health and illness in order to understand how people experience being ill or perceive the illness of others. How do people react and adjust to news about a serious illness? How does having a chronic illness affect the way people are treated by others and thus their self-identity? People in industrialized societies are now living longer but, as a result, develop more chronic illnesses, and a growing number of people are faced with the prospect of living with illness over a long period. In such cases illness becomes incorporated into an individual's personal biography.

Certain illnesses demand regular treatments or maintenance which can affect daily routines. Dialysis, insulin injections or taking large numbers of pills all demand that individuals adjust their schedules in response. Other illnesses can have unpredictable effects on the body, such as the

sudden loss of bowel or bladder control or violent nausea. Individuals affected by such conditions are forced to develop strategies for managing their illness in day-to-day life. These include practical considerations – such as always noting the location of the toilet in unfamiliar places – as well as skills for managing interpersonal relations, both intimate and routine. Although the symptoms of the illness can be embarrassing and disruptive, people develop coping strategies to live life as normally as possible (Kelly 1992).

At the same time, the experience of illness can bring about transformations in people's sense of self. These develop through the reactions of others to the illness and through imagined or perceived reactions. For the chronically ill or disabled, social interactions which are routine for many people become tinged with risk or uncertainty. The shared understandings that underpin standard, everyday interactions are not always present when illness or disability is a factor, and interpretations of common situations may differ substantially. An ill person may be in need of assistance but not want to appear dependent, for example. An individual may feel sympathy for someone who has been diagnosed with an illness but be unsure whether to address the subject directly. The changed context of social interactions can precipitate transformations in self-identity.

Illness can place enormous demands on people's time, energy, strength and emotional reserves. Sociologists have investigated how individuals manage their illness within the overall context of their lives (Jobling 1988; Williams 1993). Corbin and Strauss (1985) studied the regimes of health which the chronically ill develop in order to organize their daily lives and identified three types of 'work' contained in people's everyday strategies. *Illness work* refers to those activities involved in managing their condition, such as treating pain, doing diagnostic tests or undergoing physical therapy. *Everyday work* pertains to the management of daily life – maintaining relationships with others, running household affairs and pursuing professional or personal interests. *Biographical work* involves activities that the ill person does as part of building or reconstructing their personal narrative, incorporating the illness into their life, making sense of it and developing ways of explaining it to others. This process can help people

restore meaning and order to their lives after coming to terms with the knowledge of chronic illness. Studies of the way illness is experienced by individuals have been extremely valuable in showing how illness can disrupt personal biographies and require the rebuilding of relationships.

Biomedicine and its critics

For over 200 years, dominant Western ideas about medicine have been expressed in the biomedical model of health. This understanding developed alongside the growth of modern societies and can be considered one of their main features. The biomedical model was closely linked to the rise of science and reason, which took over many traditional or religious-based explanations of the world (see the discussion of Max Weber and rationalization in chapter 1). It was also a product of the social, political and historical context of the time, out of which arose state involvement in the health of whole populations.

Public health

Many societies before the modern era relied largely on folk remedies, treatments and healing techniques passed down over generations. Illnesses were frequently regarded in magical or religious terms and were attributed to the presence of evil spirits or 'sin'. For peasants and average town-dwellers, there was no larger authority concerned with their health in the way that states and public health systems are today. Health was much more a private matter, not a public concern.

The rise of both the nation-state and industrial development utterly transformed the situation. The emergence of nation-states with defined territories produced a shift in attitudes as local people were no longer simply inhabitants of the land but a population under the rule of a central authority. They were therefore a resource to be used for maximizing national wealth and power. The health and well-being of the population affected the nation's productivity, prosperity, defensive capabilities and rate of growth. The study of demography – the size, composition and dynamics of human populations – now assumed a much greater importance. For instance, the national census in the UK

was introduced in 1801 and repeated every ten years in order to record and monitor changes occurring in the population. Statistics were collected on birth rates, mortality rates, average ages of marriage and childbearing, suicide rates, life expectancy, diet, common illnesses, causes of death, and much more.

Michel Foucault (1926–84) (1973) drew attention to the regulation and disciplining of human bodies by European states. He argued that sex was both the way in which the population could reproduce and grow and, paradoxically, a potential threat to its health. Sexuality not linked to reproduction had to be repressed and controlled by the state through the regular collection of data about marriage, sexual behaviour, legitimacy and illegitimacy, contraceptive use and abortions. This surveillance went hand in hand with the promotion of strong public norms on sexual morality and acceptable forms of sexual activity. For example, homosexuality, masturbation and sex outside marriage were all labelled 'perversions' and condemned.

See chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', for a discussion of different forms of sexuality.

The idea of public health took shape in the attempt to eradicate diseases from the population or 'social body'. The state also assumed responsibility for improving the conditions in which the population lived. Sanitation and water systems were developed to protect against disease, roads were paved and attention was devoted to housing. Regulations were imposed on slaughterhouses and facilities for food processing. Burial practices were monitored and a whole series of institutions, including prisons, asylums, workhouses, schools and hospitals, emerged as part of the move towards monitoring, controlling and reforming the people. What Foucault describes is the emergence of a public health system that was concerned just as much with surveillance and discipline as it was with health promotion.

Since the 1990s a 'new' public health model has emerged which shifts the emphasis from the state back onto the individual. This model puts the emphasis on self-monitoring, illness prevention and 'care of the self', so that staying healthy has come to be a responsibility attached to citizenship (Petersen and Lupton 2000). This can be seen in health-promotion messages encouraging people to stop smoking, take regular exercise, and cut down on products containing high levels of salt and sugar, as well as in 'five-a-day' campaigns promoting a diet based around recommended levels of fruit and vegetables. Nonetheless, such campaigns remain firmly underpinned by advice and targets produced by medical professionals, who retain much of their power to define and legitimize illness and disease.

The biomedical model

Medical practice was closely intertwined with the social changes described above. The application of science to medical diagnosis and cure was a central aspect in the development of modern healthcare. Disease came to be defined objectively, in terms of identifiable 'signs' located in the body, as opposed to mere symptoms experienced by the patient. Formal medical care by trained 'experts' became the accepted way of treating both physical and mental illnesses, and medicine became a tool of reform for behaviours or conditions perceived as 'deviant' – from crime to homosexuality and mental illness.

Biomedicine sees patients as primarily 'sick bodies' to be diagnosed and cured rather than 'people' in the round.

There are three main assumptions on which the biomedical model of health is predicated. First, disease is viewed as a breakdown within the human body that diverts it from its 'normal' state of being. The germ theory of disease, developed in the late 1800s, holds that there is a specific identifiable agent behind every disease. In order to restore the body to health, the cause of the disease must be isolated and treated.

Second, mind and body can be treated separately. The patient represents a sick body rather than a rounded individual, and the emphasis is on curing the disease rather than on the individual's overall well-being. Arguably this is one key reason why mental health services have not received adequate levels of funding and mental disorders still carry a stigma that is not present with physical illnesses. The situation is beginning to change in many industrialized countries but still quite gradually. The biomedical model holds that the sick body can be manipulated, investigated and treated in isolation. Medical specialists adopt a 'medical gaze', a detached approach to viewing and treating the sick patient, and treatment is to be carried out in a neutral, value-free

manner, with information collected and compiled, in clinical terms, in the patient's official file.

Third, trained medical specialists are considered the only experts in the diagnosis and treatment of disease. The medical profession adheres to a recognized code of ethics and is made up of accredited practitioners who have successfully completed their long-term training. There is no room for self-taught healers or unscientific treatments. The hospital represents the appropriate environment in which to treat serious illnesses, as these often require a combination of technology, medication and/or surgery.

Criticisms of the biomedical model

Since the 1970s, the biomedical model has been subject to growing criticism. First, social historians argue that the effectiveness and impact of scientific medicine has been exaggerated. In spite of the prestige that medicine has acquired, improvements in public health should be attributed primarily to social, economic and environmental changes. According to McKeown (1979), effective sanitation, more and cheaper food, better nutrition and improved sewerage and personal hygiene have been more influential in reducing infant mortality rates than medicine. Drugs, advances in surgery and antibiotics did not significantly impact on death rates until well into the twentieth century, after public health had already improved. Similarly, antibiotics to treat bacterial infections first became available in the 1930s and 1940s, while immunizations against diseases such as polio were developed even later. Accepting this conclusion could have major consequences for the funding of health systems, especially in the Global South, trying to balance spending on medical advances and public health measures.

Second, Ivan Illich (1975), a radical critic and philosopher, argued that modern medicine has done more harm than good because of iatrogenesis – 'physician-caused' illness – and the way that medicine deskills people in relation to taking care of their own health. Illich asserted that there are three types of iatrogenesis: clinical, social and cultural. *Clinical iatrogenesis* occurs when medical treatment makes the patient worse or creates new problems. Some treatments have serious side effects, patients can contract deadly infections in hospital (such as MRSA or *Clostridium difficile*) and misdiagnosis or negligence leads to patient deaths. For example, between 2005 and 2009, hospital patient deaths in England due to medical errors rose by 60 per cent as a result of medical procedures, infections, medication errors, abuse by staff, and the mixing up of patient files (*Nursing Times* 2009).

Social iatrogenesis, or medicalization, occurs when medicine expands into more and more areas of life, creating an artificial demand for medical services and medicines as well as new technologies and constantly increasing healthcare costs. Illich maintained that social iatrogenesis leads to *cultural iatrogenesis*, where people's ability to cope with the challenges of life is progressively reduced, making them reliant on medical professionals, thus creating unnecessary dependency. Illich argued that the scope of modern medicine should be dramatically reduced to shift control back towards patients.

Third, modern medicine has been accused of discounting the opinions and experiences of patients. Because biomedicine looks for an objective understanding of the human body, there is little need to listen to the individual interpretation of patients. But critics argue that treatment is more effective when the patient is treated as a thinking, capable being with their own understanding and interpretation of health and illness. For instance, many prescription medicines are never taken, as patients either do not understand why they need them or are unconvinced of their efficacy.

Fourth, there has been a backlash against the belief that scientific medicine is superior to other forms of healing, which are considered 'unscientific' and therefore inferior. This idea is being eroded by the growing popularity of complementary and alternative forms of medicine, particularly in situations where biomedicine has proved

ineffective. This challenge is likely to grow as the 'disease burden' continues to shift towards chronic illnesses, which demand a more collaborative relationship between physicians and patients.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

10.1 Complementary or Alternative Medicine?

Jan Mason had enjoyed vibrant health, but she began experiencing extreme tiredness and depression and her doctor was unable to provide her with much relief. 'I went to the doctor but nobody could tell me what it was. My GP said it was glandular fever and gave me antibiotics which gave me terrible thrush. Then he kept saying that he did not know what it was either.... I went through all the tests. I was really very poorly. It went on for six months. I was still ill and they still did not know what it was' (quoted in Sharma 1992: 37). Jan's doctor suggested anti-depressants as she was suffering from stress, but Jan did not see them as the answer. On the advice of a friend, she sought out the assistance of a homeopath – an alternative medical practitioner who assesses the state of the whole body and then, using minuscule doses of substances, treats 'like with like', on the assumption that the symptoms of a disease are part of a body's self-healing process. On finding a homeopath whose approach she was comfortable with, Jan was pleased with the treatment she received (Sharma 1992).

Many people have tried alternative therapies such as homeopathy, but are they really effective? Edzard Ernst – the first professor of complementary medicine at Essex University – argues that his research studies show that the vast majority do not 'work' and many carry risks and cause more harm than good. He knowingly calls the variety of alternative therapies 'so-called alternative medicine', or SCAMs. Ernst takes issue with the idea that a patient's experience of improvement following alternative therapy (as in Jan's case) can be taken as evidence of the efficacy of the therapy. He explains:

For many clinicians, experience is more meaningful than evidence. While I do sympathise with this notion (I have been a clinician for many years), I nevertheless doubt that they are correct. Two events – the treatment administered by the clinician and the improvement experienced by the patient – that follow each other in time are not necessarily causally related. Correlation is not the same as causation! ... Even the most superficial glance at the possibilities discloses several options.

- The natural history of the condition: most conditions get better, even if they are not treated at all.

- The regression towards the mean: over time, outliers tend to return to the middle.

- The placebo effect: expectation and conditioning affects how we feel.

- Concomitant treatments: patients often take more than one treatment, and it can be impossible to say which worked and which did not.

- Social desirability: patients tend to claim they felt better simply to please their therapist. (Ernst 2018)

The UK's NHS stopped funding homeopathy and other alternative therapies at the Royal London Hospital for Integrated Medicine (formerly the Royal London Homeopathic Hospital, as above) in 2018. Following a systematic review of the evidence, NHS chief executive Simon Stevens said that, 'At best, homeopathy is a placebo and a misuse of NHS funds which could better be devoted to treatments that work' (Matthews-King 2018).

For Ernst and other critics of alternative therapies, *clinical experience* is no substitute for carefully controlled *clinical trials*, and the underlying assumptions of alternative therapies contradict the laws of nature and are just not plausible.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Have you or someone you know tried complementary or alternative therapies? What led you or them to do so? Which therapies were tried and were they effective? On reflection, how did the therapy's assumptions and practices differ from the biomedical model above?

Before the mid-twentieth century, the major illnesses were infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, malaria and polio, which could

take on epidemic proportions and threaten a whole population. In the developed countries today, these acute diseases have been substantially eradicated. The most common causes of death today are non-infectious, chronic diseases such as cancer, heart disease, diabetes or circulatory disease. This shift is referred to as the 'health transition' (see figure 10.1). In pre-modern Europe the highest rates of death were among infants and young children, but today death rates rise with increasing age and people live longer with chronic degenerative diseases. There is also increased emphasis on 'lifestyle choices' which influence the onset of illness. Following the health transition, the biomedical model looks increasingly outdated. After all, many people who live with chronic conditions are likely to become experts in the management of the condition. Thus, the power gradient between doctor and patient becomes less steep and loses much of its previous asymmetrical character.
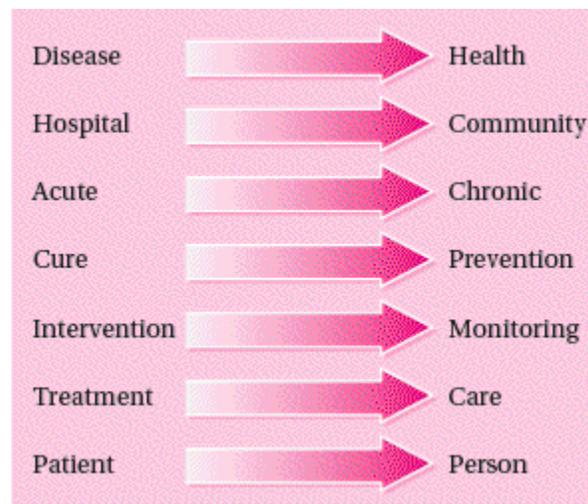
Figure 10.1 Contemporary transformations in health and medicine

Source: Nettleton (2020: 11).

Many people see the rise of alternative therapies such as reflexology, hypnotherapy, chiropractic or homeopathy as posing a real challenge to the dominance of biomedicine, but we should be cautious about this assessment. The 2019–20 Covid-19 pandemic was notable for the way that national governments and political leaders took their advice from health scientists, pandemic modellers and medical professionals. These groups became much more prominent, and some became recognizable

public figures, appearing regularly on television to pass on the latest statistics and educate people about the virus and methods of transmission. In the stark form presented through this health crisis, it became clear that scientific biomedicine remains dominant institutionally and as a form of reliable knowledge and effective practice.

In normal times, most people who turn to alternative therapies do so not as a substitute for orthodox treatment but will try alternatives *after* gaining a medical diagnosis, and then often *alongside* mainstream treatments. Again, this indicates that biomedicine remains firmly established within modern healthcare systems, and, for this reason, most sociologists see non-orthodox techniques as *complementary* rather than genuine alternatives (Saks 1992). Indeed, some complementary therapies, such as acupuncture, have become part of mainstream healthcare systems and are offered alongside biomedical diagnosis and treatment.

There are a number of reasons why people turn to a complementary or alternative practitioner. Some perceive orthodox medicine as deficient or incapable of relieving chronic, nagging pain or the symptoms of stress and anxiety. Others are dissatisfied with the way in which healthcare systems function and are fed up with long waiting lists, referrals through chains of specialists, financial restrictions, and so on. Many more are concerned about the harmful side effects of medication or the intrusiveness of surgery, both of which are mainstays of modern medicine. The asymmetrical power relationship between doctors and patients is also a problem for some patients, who feel their knowledge of their own body is not taken seriously enough during consultations and diagnosis, leaving them dissatisfied. Finally, some people have religious or philosophical objections to orthodox medicine, which tends to treat mind and body separately. They believe that a more holistic approach involving the spiritual and psychological dimensions is more likely to be found in alternative therapies.

The growth of alternative medicine reflects some of the social changes occurring within modern societies. We live in an information-rich age where more and more information is available from a variety of sources, not least the internet, that are taken into account when making

lifestyle and health choices. Individuals are increasingly becoming 'health consumers', adopting an active stance towards their own health that is at odds with the passive bearing required by conventional medicine. Not only are people able to make choices about which practitioners to consult, but they also demand more involvement in their care and treatment. The number of self-help groups is increasing, and people are more likely to seize control of their lives and actively reshape them rather than relying only on the instructions or opinions of medical experts.

Some of the strongest criticisms of biomedicine have come from women, who argue that the processes of pregnancy and childbirth have been medicalized. Rather than remaining in the hands of women – with the help of midwives – in the home, most childbirths occur in hospitals under the direction of predominantly male specialists. Pregnancy, a common and natural phenomenon, is treated in similar ways to an 'illness', laden with risks and dangers. Feminists argue that women have lost control over the process and that their opinions and knowledge are deemed irrelevant by male 'experts' who oversee reproductive processes (Oakley 1984). The medical profession has the power, as the arbiter of 'scientific truth', to bring more areas of human life under the medical gaze (see 'Using your sociological imagination' 10.2 for the role of pharmaceutical companies in defining illness).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

10.2 Psychopharmaceuticals: from treatment to enhancement?

Sociologists have shown that medical professionals play a key role in defining what constitutes 'illness' and how it should be treated. Yet it is also clear that pharmaceutical companies take the lead in developing treatments for emerging health problems. One recently identified health issue is fatigue or excessive sleepiness, and there are medically recognized sleep disorders such as narcolepsy – a brain disorder which causes 'sleep attacks' where people fall asleep without warning. One drug, modafinil, made by the pharmaceutical company Cephalon in Pennsylvania, USA, was licensed ostensibly for the treatment of narcolepsy, as it helps people to stay awake. However, over time it has been used in the treatment of other conditions, such as obstructive sleep apnoea (OSA) (temporary blockage of the airway) and shift-work sleep disorder (SWSD).

The extension into more general usage for a whole new range of 'disorders' raises concerns about the power of psychopharmaceutical companies. Williams (2010: 538) argues that 'concerns have recently been expressed about the role of the pharmaceutical industry not simply in the manufacturing and marketing and manufacturing of drugs, but also in the manufacturing and marketing of disorders for these drugs to treat.' If this is true, then the process of medicalization has to be seen in a wider social context, taking in the development, manufacture and marketing of medicines as well as the undoubted power of the medical profession.

Modafinil seems to be a rational solution to some of the problems generated by our 24/7 society, which demands job flexibility, long working hours and extended periods of intense concentration. Williams (2010: 540) suggests that the legitimacy of using drugs to promote 'wakefulness' rests on safety concerns: 'Would you, for

example, feel safer in the hands of a chemically-enhanced physician or pilot, whose performance at the operating table or in the cockpit will not be affected by sleepiness?' But is using the drug in these situations really a 'treatment' for a real health problem, or is it best seen as a performance enhancer that enables workers to perform the range of tasks that employers now demand of them?

THINKING CRITICALLY

Is 'fatigue' or 'sleepiness' a medical issue that demands pharmaceutical intervention? Does this brief discussion support the contention that private companies invent illnesses as well as pharmaceutical interventions, or is the medical profession the more powerful partner?

Concerns about the medicalization of previously 'normal' conditions have been raised in relation to unhappiness or mild depression, tiredness (labelled 'chronic fatigue syndrome') and ADHD ('attention deficit hyperactivity disorder') in children. In the United States, more than 2 million prescriptions per month are written for ADHD drugs (mainly Ritalin) for children, and between 3 and 5 per cent of America's children live with the condition. In Britain, 361,832 prescriptions for Ritalin and similar medications were issued in 2005, most of them for children with diagnosed ADHD (Boseley 2006). Ten years later the figure had risen to 922,200 (National Health Executive 2015).

Ritalin has been described as 'the magic pill' which helps children to focus, calms them down and helps them to learn more effectively. Critics argue that the 'symptoms' of ADHD reflect the growing pressures and stresses on children – an increasingly fast pace of life, the overwhelming effect of information technology, lack of exercise, high-sugar diets and the fraying of family life. For critics, the widespread use of Ritalin has, in effect, medicalized child hyperactivity and inattentiveness rather than drawing attention to the social causes of the observed symptoms.

Innovative health technologies

The social context within which eating disorders can spread has been explored by sociologists through the concept of the socialization of nature. Phenomena previously seen as 'natural', including the body, have become 'social' because they are shaped by human actions. One theme of this chapter is the creation of new dilemmas brought about by the increasing separation of the human body from 'nature', the natural environment and the body's biological rhythms via the increasing application of science and technology. Cosmetic surgery enabling people to mould and shape their bodies is an obvious example, but modern healthcare also brings a plethora of widely differing medical technologies, including blood pressure monitors, prosthetic limbs, replacement joints, ultrasound and MRI scanning, telemedicine, reproductive technologies such as IVF, organ transplants, drug treatments, surgical instruments, acupuncture needles, gene therapies, and many more.

Even this range is quite narrowly focused on *material* technologies, but we must also include what Michel Foucault (1988) called *social technologies* affecting the body. By this he means that the individual body is increasingly something we have to create rather than just accept. A social technology is any kind of regular intervention into the functioning of our bodies in order to alter them in specific ways, such as fasting, purging, choosing specific types of food (such as organics), and dieting to achieve 'good health' or a specific body size and shape. Modern life offers more ways to intervene and mould our own bodies than ever before.

Novel health technologies also offer the potential for new approaches to the prevention and treatment of disease, and one of the most recent is experimental gene therapy. In 1990 an international research programme, the Human Genome Project, was launched, aiming to map the entire human DNA sequence – all of the genes that make up human beings. In 2003 it was announced that the project had been successfully completed – an astonishing scientific achievement with revolutionary potential. The new knowledge underpins a 'biotechnological revolution' in medicine that could see applications and bodily interventions that will genuinely transform the delivery of healthcare. Gene therapy – the use of genes (rather than drugs, surgery or medicines) to treat or

prevent the onset of disease – carries perhaps the greatest potential. For example, where a mutated or non-functioning gene causes illness, gene therapy can be used to create a healthy copy that can be implanted into the body to replace it. Genes could also be introduced into bodies to help fight disease or to deactivate faulty genes that cause health problems.

A good example of the enormous potential of gene therapy was demonstrated in an experimental trial to treat a rare condition in which a child has no functioning immune system, leaving the body unable to deal with disease. Severe combined immunodeficiency – X-linked (X-SCID) – is a genetic condition affecting only boys, and treatment usually involves stem cell transplants in bone marrow from donors; however, gene therapy is less intrusive and can avoid the use of chemotherapy. One reported trial involved nine children in five cities in the USA, the UK and France, seven of whom were said to be doing well up to forty-three months after the first treatment (Marcus 2014; Stephens 2014).

Digital technology potentially brings medical expertise into hard-to-reach rural areas via internetbased telemedicine. This cardiologist in Sonora, Mexico, engages in a pre-op consultation with a patient 400 miles away. The lay–professional relationship in future may be one of 'remote doctors and absent patients' (Mort et al. 2003).

Clearly, successful examples of gene therapies raise the tantalizing prospect of cures for inherited conditions such as sickle cell anaemia, but they also have enormous commercial potential. In 2012, the European Union became the first regulatory authority to approve a 'oneoff' gene therapy, with the brand name Glybera, for patients with familial lipoprotein lipase deficiency (LPLD), a rare inherited metabolic condition which produces multiple debilitating pancreatitis attacks. In 2014, a genetic testing company, 23 and Me, was launched in the UK selling testing kits enabling screening for genetic diseases and allowing customers to explore their personal genome. Yet the prospect of gene testing and therapies has also raised serious safety concerns and can be prohibitively expensive. For example, Uniqure, the company producing Glybera, withdrew the therapy from the market in 2017, saying that demand was low (between 350 and 700 patients in Europe) and the

cost was around €1 million per patient (European Biotechnology 2017).

Genetic testing offers the possibility of more accurate forecasting of health risks. A good example is testing for a genetic predisposition to develop breast cancer, which identifies which people are at risk of developing the disease so they can make better-informed decisions about treatment. However, as Nettleton (2020: 146) observes, genetic testing can create more uncertainty, turning a healthy individual into 'a "patient without symptoms", a body that has greater likelihood of developing a condition: a kind of partial diagnosis.' There may also be significant impacts on everyday life if test results indicating a heightened risk of serious conditions are shared with financial institutions, insurance companies, government departments and employers.

For some, the very language of the 'new genetics' is an issue, as it has begun to dominate debates on health and illness, leading to an individualized, medicalized and reductionist notion of what constitutes 'health' and 'illness' extracted from their social and cultural context (Conrad 2002). As a result, simple biological explanations are becoming more commonplace and, in a reversal of the recent trend towards a more equal lay–professional relationship, the medical profession is regaining its powerful position as the only legitimate source of expertise in this expanding field.

On the other hand, sociological studies have found that those with a shared biological status have also formed groups providing mutual support, lobbying governments for research funding and working with medics and scientists to understand better the specific condition and its consequences (Rabinow 1999). Patients also tend to locate genetic test results within their wider framework of understanding and may not even view them as especially significant, seeing family history as a better indicator of their health prospects. Similarly, doctors may have more confidence in, say, cholesterol readings and symptoms as described by patients than in genetic test results (Will et al. 2010).

So, despite legitimate concerns about the impact of new health technologies, the way these are understood and integrated into the

existing social contexts of people's everyday lives means we cannot assume that people are simply at the mercy of a newly 'imposed' technology. Empirical studies will help to uncover how the new technologies are being used and understood.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> Would you be prepared to take part in a programme of genetic testing? What positive results might you expect and what problems could widespread testing generate? On balance, is genetic testing a positive development for the population as a whole?

Today we are living through a period of significant and rapid reform in modern medicine and people's attitudes towards the care of their own health. Yet the notion that the transformations in healthcare discussed throughout this section will result in a new 'health paradigm' to replace the biomedical model seems unlikely. The biomedical model is deeply embedded within healthcare systems, and many of the recent health technologies may actually strengthen rather than weaken biomedical ideas on disease causation and treatment. As we will see next, epidemics and pandemics also pose global public health issues that will not be successfully prevented or tackled without the involvement of scientific medicine.

Pandemics and globalization

A disease epidemic can be defined as an infection that spreads beyond that which is expected within a particular community, while a pandemic is said to be 'an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and usually affecting a large number of people' (Last 2001). Compared with readers of our earlier editions, those today will probably need little education in this distinction, having lived through the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, widely known as Covid-19 ('coronavirus disease 2019'), the first genuinely global pandemic of the twenty-first century (ECDC 2020a, 2020b). In our era of intensified global connections, pandemics may become more commonplace.

Yet disease epidemics and pandemics are not new. In the early fourteenth century, bubonic plague broke out in China when the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* was transmitted to humans by rat fleas, which spread the disease via merchant ships and major trading routes into Asia and Europe. In just five years, from 1347 to 1352, it is estimated that at least 25 million people in Europe died – between one-third and half of the entire population (Cunningham 2011: 101). New outbreaks continued to develop around the world until the seventeenth century. In 1918–19, at the end of the First World War, an influenza pandemic known as 'Spanish flu' (Spain was the first country to declare an epidemic) spread across Europe and other parts of the world, killing around 50 million people and disproportionately affecting young adults between twenty and forty years old – many more than had died in the war (Barry 2005: 4–5).

In recent years there have also been several potentially serious pandemics. SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) – a type of coronavirus that can develop into life-threatening pneumonia – emerged in Guandong Province, China, in 2003, infecting around 8,000 people around the world and killing more than 750 (Centers for Disease Control 2014). 2009 saw the spread of 'swine flu', in which the infectious agent, a new type of the H1N1 'common' influenza virus, was a combination of genetic material from humans, birds and swine 'mixed' within Mexican pigs to create a new strain. By the end of 2010, the WHO announced that the pandemic was at an end; although the original estimate of deaths from swine flu was around 18,000, the latest analyses suggest that some 280,000 people died, with South-East Asia, Africa and South America the worst affected regions (Dawood et al. 2012).

Globalization processes, particularly more fluid population movements across nation-states and regional boundaries, may be leading to a new 'pandemic age' in which viruses are able to combine more readily, spread more rapidly, and travel further than at any time in the past. With each development in transportation, from horse-drawn carriages to boats and ships, road networks and air travel, the human population has moved itself, other animals and products around the world in increasingly efficient and systematic ways. The virologist Nathan Wolfe

(2011: 118) argues that, today, globalization facilitates the widespread transmission of infectious agents, giving them 'a truly global stage on which to act'. It also means the more rapid spread of disease, because 'humans can literally have their boots in the mud of Australia one day and in the rivers of the Amazon the next.'

Globalization is not the only cause of new pandemics. Consumption of bushmeat in parts of Africa, the sale of wildlife in some Chinese 'wet markets', continuing urbanization, and the growth of cities and industrial farming are also factors in the development and spread of infections. Yet globalization also enables the sharing of expertise, collation of data from many sources, medical facilities, and new treatments which could make those pandemics less severe than in the past. Next we look at three examples which illustrate the contemporary situation.

The Great Disruption: Covid-19

The outbreak of Covid-19 in late 2019 and on into 2020 and 2021 is easily the most globally disruptive pandemic of the last 100 years. However, at the time of writing (late November 2020), the pandemic has not yet been brought fully under control, with major restrictions on civil liberties and emergency legislation still in place. There is no reliable body of peer-reviewed work to draw on at this stage, and therefore what can legitimately be said about this major health event, sociologically or otherwise, is clearly limited. What we can do is outline some of the key issues arising from Covid-19 and the response of societies to it.

Covid-19 is an infectious disease, the result of a newly discovered coronavirus. The virus was first identified in the city of Wuhan, China, in late 2019 and quickly spread across the world, with a severe impact on economies and social life. In most people Covid-19 produces mild symptoms of a fever, a persistent cough and lethargy. Although it seems less likely to affect children and young people, in severe cases at any age it can lead to breathing problems and organ failure, which have proved fatal (*New Scientist* 2020). So far the highest death rates have been in Europe, the USA and Brazil. Older people, especially those with existing health conditions, are at much greater risk of long-term

damage or death, and a significant proportion of all deaths have been in care homes.

As of 5 January 2021, the WHO reports that there have been just over 84.2 million identified cases of Covid-19 globally across 220 countries and territories, and 1,843,293 people have died with the virus (WHO 2021; see also [figures 10.2a](#) and [10.2b](#)). Perhaps the most notable aspect of the pandemic globally is that it has affected mainly countries in the Global North, despite fears that healthcare systems in the Global South could have been overwhelmed. Although every country in Africa reported some cases of the virus, by 4 January 2021 there had been just 2.85 million identified cases and 67,986 deaths across the whole continent (Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention 2021). The WHO suggested that the younger age profile of African countries may mean a relatively low overall death rate, though it also forecast a rapid rise in infection rates.

Such basic statistical evidence is open to future revision, as infections depend on different rates of testing, and death rates are best estimates, given the different recording and reporting methods at national level. For instance, Italy's published statistics do not include deaths in care homes, Sweden's do, while Belgium's take in 'suspected deaths' where no test was carried out (which helps to explain its relatively high rate). Given that the WHO estimates that between one-third and one half of all Covid-19 deaths in Europe may occur in long-term care facilities, the impact on older people may be even more serious. Sweden's health and social affairs minister admitted frankly that 'We failed to protect our elderly. That's really serious, and a failure for society as a whole' (cited in *Bangkok Post* 2020). In the UK, the National Care Association said care homes felt 'completely abandoned' as the virus spread across the country (BBC News 2020d). Governments were focused on avoiding hospitals becoming overwhelmed, leading to a far higher death rate in care homes than elsewhere.
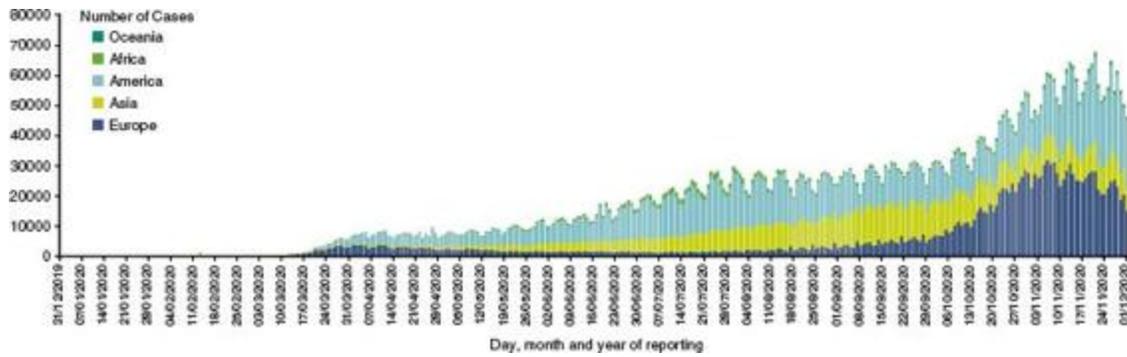
Figure 10.2a Distribution of Covid-19 cases, worldwide, by continent, 30 November 2020
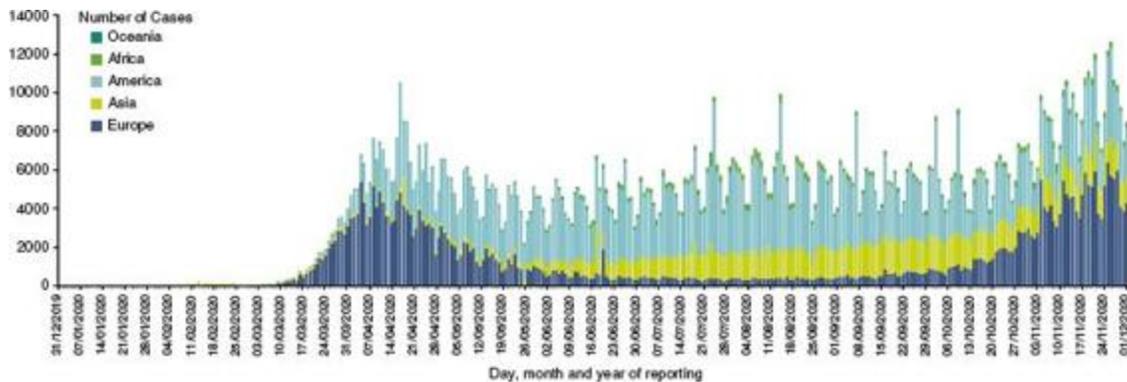
Source: ECDC (2020b).

Figure 10.2b Distribution of Covid-19 deaths, worldwide, by continent, 30 November 2020

Source: ECDC (2020b).

Following China's lead in locking down the initial outbreak, many governments introduced a raft of restrictive measures, including shutting down large parts of their economies to try and halt the spread of the virus. Among these were school closures, travel bans, border closures, workplace closures, bans on public gatherings, social distancing measures, emergency legislation, additional spending on healthcare and welfare (including the state paying workers' wages) and track-and-trace testing of populations (Hale et al. 2020). The blanket restrictions on civil liberties, particularly 'stay-at-home' orders for the mass of healthy people, and state intervention to help businesses and workers can legitimately be described as unprecedented.

A small number of countries, most notably Sweden, avoided strict lockdown measures, producing advice and guidance for citizens while keeping shops, cafés, bars and schools open and banning large gatherings. The Swedish government relied on voluntary distancing and personal responsibility. By mid-May 2020, Sweden's death rate was higher than that of its stricter neighbours, Denmark, Norway and Iceland, but lower than that in Spain, Italy, the UK, the USA and France, all of which imposed strict lockdown measures. Reliable comparisons remain to be carried out on the relative success of these different ways of handling the pandemic.

In a very short period of time, the Covid-19 crisis alerted politicians and the public to the best-evidenced finding in health sociology (as we will see later in the chapter) – that health, morbidity and mortality are patterned according to structures of social inequality. The UK's Office for National Statistics has been at the forefront of early attempts to understand this, by examining death certificates. It found that black men were 4.2 times and black women 4.3 times more likely to die with Covid-19 than white men and women respectively. People of Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian and mixed ethnicities also had statistically significant, higher risks of dying with the virus (ONS 2020a).

The ONS also looked at which *occupations* had the highest death rates. The study found that, of 2,449 deaths in the working-age population (those aged twenty to sixty-four), two-thirds were men, and the highest death rates were for men working in the ONS's category of 'lowest skilled' occupations. More specifically, significantly raised death rates were found among male security guards, male and female care workers and home carers, male taxi-drivers and chauffeurs, bus and coach drivers, chefs, and sales and retail assistants (ONS 2020b: 1–2). More research is clearly needed, but people in these occupations clearly cannot work from home and, for many workers, not working means not being paid. Hence, 'lowskill', low-paid workers – many from black and minority ethnic groups – were more likely to carry on working through the pandemic, while other groups continued working from home or were part-paid by the state to stay at home.

Central London, mid-morning, June 2020: during the Covid-19 pandemic, people in the world's major cities got used to the absence of mass traffic, cleaner air and virtually empty streets as governments issued stay-at-home instructions.

Stay-at-home orders led to a worsening of domestic abuse situations as strict restrictions were placed on freedom of movement. Many countries, including Brazil, Greece, Spain and the UK, reported rising levels of domestic abuse during the first weeks of the pandemic (Graham-Harrison et al. 2020). In the UK, disabled people's organizations also protested that disabled people had been 'largely forgotten' in the government's response, risking more severe social exclusion. In particular, heightened social isolation, a lack of social care, and the suspension of individual rights to some council services impacted on the physical and mental health of disabled people (Haynes 2020).

There will, no doubt, be a full range of socialscientific analyses in the future, but what we can say is that the pandemic has shown how

structured social inequalities continue to shape people's health and life chances. Also, despite its many positive aspects, the globalization of human connectivity has provided new routes for the more rapid transmission of diseases and infectious agents. In essence, the pandemic illustrates one of this book's underlying ideas: that the modern, globalizing human world is a place of high opportunities but also of high risks. It is clear, too, that risks and rewards are systematically unequally distributed.

Globalization processes and debates around these are the subject of [chapter 4](#), 'Globalization and Social Change'.

The HIV/AIDS pandemic

A powerful reminder that the general shift from acute to chronic conditions is not absolute came in the early 1980s with the emergence of a new epidemic – HIV – which rapidly became a pandemic leading to the deaths of millions of people as HIV infection developed into AIDS. A person is said to have 'acquired immunodeficiency syndrome' (AIDS) when the number of immune cells in the body falls below a designated minimum required to fight off infections. At that point the individual is susceptible to opportunistic infections which the body is unable to fight, leading to serious, life-threatening diseases such as pneumonia, tuberculosis and skin cancers. AIDS is the result of damage caused by previous infection with the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV).

There is still no 'cure' for AIDS, nor is there a vaccine to prevent HIV infection. In this situation health professionals concentrated on turning HIV infection from a potentially fatal acute illness into a chronic condition that can be safely managed. The focus has been on slowing down infection rates through public health education and developing drug treatments which delay the onset of AIDS. Transmission of HIV occurs in four main ways:

- from unprotected penetrative sex with an infected person

- from injection or transfusion of contaminated blood or blood products such as skin grafts or organ transplants from infected people

- from infected mothers to their babies during pregnancy, at birth or through breastfeeding

- sharing unsterilized injection equipment used by an infected person.

AIDS BY THE NUMBERS 2017

36.9 million
people living with HIV

21.7 million
people living with HIV
accessing treatment

1.8 million
new HIV infections

3 out of 4
people living with HIV knew their status

940,000
AIDS-related deaths

4 out of 5
people who knew their status were
accessing treatment

35%
reduction in new HIV infections among
children since 2010
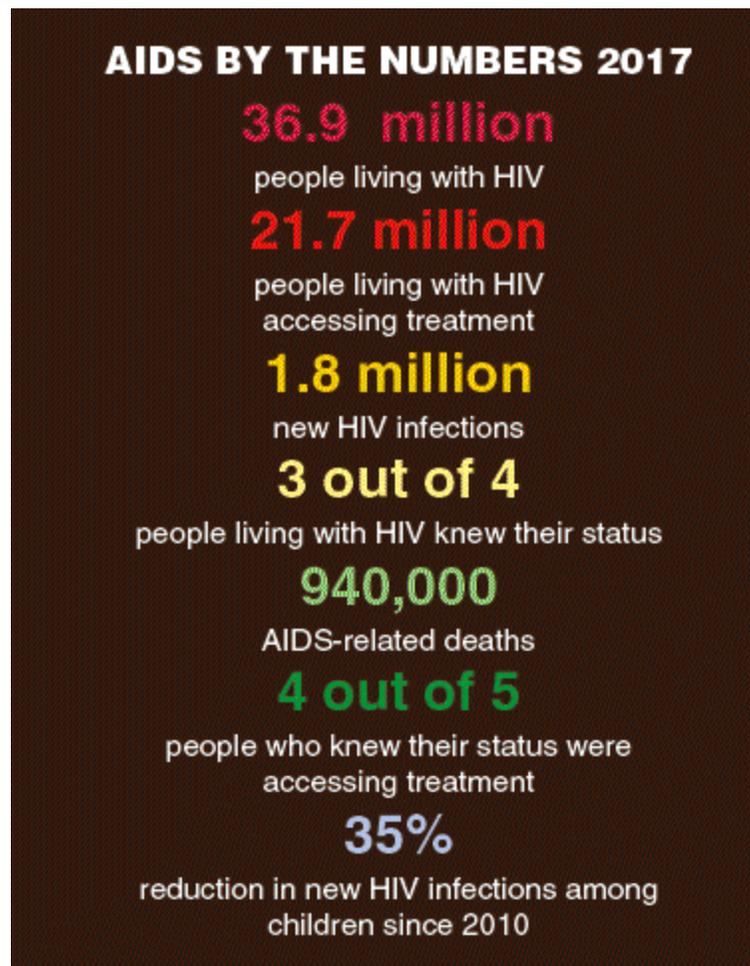
Figure 10.3 AIDS by the numbers, 2017

Source: UN (2018).

The WHO estimates that, at the end of 2017, almost 37 million people around the world were living with HIV, around 25 million of those in Africa. There were 940,000 AIDS-related deaths in 2017. Since the

pandemic began in the 1980s, around 77.3 million people have been infected with HIV and 35.4 million have died of HIV/AIDS-related conditions (UN 2018). The bald statistics show that this is one of the deadliest pandemics in human history, and HIV/AIDS has become a major cause of death, especially in many parts of Africa (UNAIDS 2008).

Although there is some evidence of a rising trend in the USA (where the disease was first identified in 1981), China and Eastern Europe, the global rise in the number of people living with HIV has slowed; almost 22 million people with HIV are accessing treatment, and AIDS-related deaths have fallen by 47 per cent since the peak in 1996. However, 1.8 million people were newly infected with HIV in 2017 (figure 10.3) and the number of people living with the virus continues to rise, partly as a result of the effectiveness of anti-retroviral treatments (ART) in delaying the onset of AIDS (UNAIDS 2014: 4). Yet the drugs are expensive and, while there has been progress in widening their distribution since 2010, many people with HIV in the Global South still do not have access to the most effective treatments. For example, at the end of 2017, some 21.7 million people were receiving anti-retroviral therapy, but this leaves over 40 per cent of those with HIV without effective treatment. Clearly there is some way to go before HIV can be said to be 'under control' globally, but the UN and WHO statistics show that the spread of HIV has been stopped and indeed reversed.

What are the *sociological* lessons to be learned from the HIV/AIDS pandemic? Erving Goffman (1963) argued that stigma is a relationship of devaluation in which one individual or group is disqualified from full social acceptance. Stigmas are rarely based on valid understanding but spring from stereotypes or false perception, which may be only partially correct. In some cases the stigma is never removed and the person is never fully accepted into society. Certainly this was true of early AIDS patients in the USA, the UK and elsewhere, and it continues in parts of Africa and Asia.
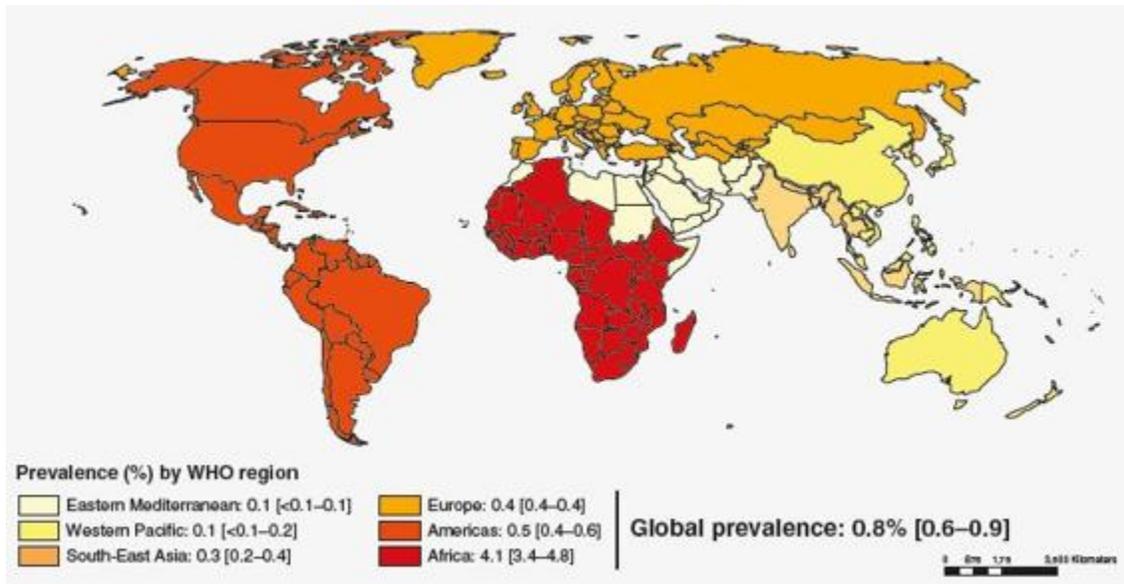
Figure 10.4 Global adult HIV prevalence (15 to 49 years), 2017, by WHO region

Source: WHO (2017a).

Global society 10.1 The stigma of HIV in rural China

In 2018, the Centre for Disease Control in China reported that the country had around 850,000 people living with HIV, and over recent years it has seen a sharp rise in infection rates. However, this rise has been mainly the result of sexual transmission rather than, as in the past, via HIV-infected blood during transfusions (Avert 2019). HIV infection is a particular issue in China in relation to commercial sex work and among men who have sex with men, the majority of whom go on to marry women, as dictated by the country's conventional norms (see chapter 2, 'Asking and Answering Sociological Questions').

Discrimination against and the stigmatizing of HIV-infected people remains common in China, especially in rural areas, and authorities have strengthened and expanded their information and education campaigns to help bring infection rates down and reduce discrimination. In 2009, it was reported that it was still not uncommon for workers who tested positive for HIV to be 'persuaded' to leave their work, while some doctors and surgeons refused to treat HIV-positive individuals, despite regulations requiring medics to treat patients on an equal basis (Yanhai et al. 2009: 18).

One widely reported individual case of discrimination from 2014 was that of Kun Kun (a pseudonym), an eight-year-old boy who contracted HIV from his mother before birth. He lived with his grandparents in a rural village in Sichuan province as his parents work away from the area, but his presence became a source of concern for many. Over 200 villagers signed a petition requesting the authorities introduce isolation measures in order to protect them from infection (BBC News 2014d). The lack of reliable information and education on HIV transmission routes is the main reason why education campaigns have been introduced in such rural areas.

Rising HIV rates have led the Chinese government to launch a nationwide education campaign to reduce stigmatization and discrimination.

A study of almost 3,000 people in Guangxi province, carried out in 2012–13 and reported in 2016, looked at the relationship between the imposition of social stigma and routes of infection (Zhang et al. 2016). In particular, the study found a distinction between 'blameless' and 'blamable' HIV transmission routes and levels of perceived stigma. Blameless routes were sexual relations within a stable relationship and via blood transfusion. Blamable routes included injecting drug use, sex with commercial sex workers and among men who have sex with men. Respondents in the blamable group reported higher levels of stigmatization and marginalization, with those who injected drugs reporting the worst emotional, physical and financial consequences.

Although such stigmatization processes are not unique to China or its rural areas, the development of HIV/AIDS in China does have some distinctive aspects. Most notable of these is the impact of contaminated blood supplies in rural central China in the mid-1990s. The use of contaminated blood led to a huge increase in HIV

infection across a very large area, including a development that came to be known as 'AIDS villages', in which large numbers of villagers became infected with the virus.

Yanhai et al. (2009: 15) explain that 'many farmers, women and children already living in poverty became infected with HIV/AIDS. The source of women's infection was primarily medical operations, for example during gynaecological operations or during childbirth, and their husbands who sold blood in blood stations or received blood in hospitals. Children frequently became infected through their parents and mortality due to infection was initially high.' It seems that the historical memories stemming from this period continue to feed into the kind of exaggerated fears expressed by villagers in Kun Kun's story outlined above.

Because HIV/AIDS was first discovered among gay men in the USA, some commentators referred to the disease as GRID – 'gay related immune deficiency' – as a 'fast-lane' gay lifestyle was said to *cause* the disease (Nettleton 2020: 53). The supposed connection between particular lifestyles and risk of infection initially led to the stigmatizing of gay men and certain lifestyles. Nettleton points out that research findings soon discredited such beliefs, showing that it was specific *practices*, such as injecting with non-sterilized needles or engaging in unprotected penetrative sex, that transmitted the virus. Nevertheless, epidemiological interpretations of gay men as a 'high-risk group' tended to reinforce their separation from the 'heterosexual general public', thus lulling the latter into a dangerous sense of false security.

HIV/AIDS also raises important issues in relation to social inequalities. In many countries, heterosexual norms of masculinity reject the use of condoms, favouring unprotected sex as a way of 'being a man', but the consequences could hardly be more serious for heterosexual women. Global inequality between the Global North and South is emphasized by the HIV/AIDS pandemic, as HIV-infected people in the wealthy countries have a much higher chance of survival than those in poorer ones. Attempts to make anti-retroviral drugs more widely available in developing countries have had some success in recent years, while the WHO reports that making pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), which uses

anti-retroviral medication to prevent HIV infection, available for safe use around the world will be the next big challenge.

See [chapter 6](#), 'Global Inequality', for a wider discussion of these issues.

Preventing an Ebola pandemic

In 1976 a viral disease caused the deaths of 280 people in Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). As it originated in Yambuku, a village close to the Ebola River, the illness was called Ebola virus disease (EVD). In the same year, EVD also led to the deaths of 151 people in Nzara in Sudan. The virus is brought into the human population by contact with wild animals and spreads through contact with bodily fluids, secretions, organs and contaminated environments, such as the clothing and bedding of infected people. EVD proves fatal in 50 to 60 per cent of infected people, and there is no approved vaccine, though recent experimental treatments have been successful in a small number of patients. Since 1976 the WHO has identified more than twenty Ebola outbreaks, mostly in Central Africa. The most recent outbreak was in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 2018, which had killed at least 1,800 people by August 2019. Yet the most deadly Ebola outbreak began in Guinea, West Africa, in December 2013 and was first reported in March 2014.

By 12 October 2014, the WHO (2014) estimated that around 4,500 people had died of EVD: 2,458 in Liberia, 1,183 in Sierra Leone, 843 in Guinea, eight in Nigeria and one in the USA. However, the US Centers for Disease Control suggested that, as people were dying of the disease without attending health centres, the true figure could be at least double that total. The 2014 epidemic was said to be the result of close contact between humans and wild animals, most likely fruit bats, which are a 'natural reservoir' for the Ebola virus. Previous outbreaks tended

to occur in remote rural villages, but the latest one spread quickly to urban centres such as the capital of Guinea, Conakry. Health facilities were overstretched, and a lack of basic equipment and protective clothing contributed to at least 440 healthcare workers themselves becoming infected.

Healthcare workers in West Africa donned full personal protective equipment to avoid catching and potentially spreading the Ebola virus during the 2014 outbreak. Essential protection such as this was not readily available in Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Some governments in the developed world, including Canada, the USA and the UK, introduced airport screening to try to prevent the spread of Ebola, though most of the relatively wealthy countries have the advanced health facilities and resources available to control the spread of any infection. Therefore it was unlikely that a pandemic with mass fatalities would occur in all parts of the world. Outbreaks in Nigeria and Senegal were brought under control quickly, and in Guinea – which has a stronger healthcare system – the situation was stabilizing by mid-October. But in Sierra Leone and Liberia the virus spread into densely

populated urban areas and became much more difficult to halt (BBC News 2014a).

Understanding Ebola (and other pandemics) is not simply to grasp biological facts – infectious agents, transmission routes and the spread of infection – it also takes us to the heart of why global inequality remains, quite literally, a matter of life and death. As Doherty (2013: xxxvi) puts it:

> when it comes to pandemics, the pathogen – the infectious cause – is only half the equation: the other half is who we are and what we do. Thinking that way should also cause us to extend our concern about pandemics to a much greater challenge – that of achieving a more equitable and environmentally sustainable earth. In the long term, it is on this achievement that our survival as a species will depend. Pandemics are only part of the story, and perhaps not even the scariest part.

In Sierra Leone and Liberia, civil wars in the 1990s damaged both countries' infrastructure, leaving them without a properly functioning healthcare system and thus making them more vulnerable to a rapid transmission of the virus. As a result, much of the loss of life to EVD in West Africa has been attributed to poorly resourced health provision and a lack of basic services and infrastructure, such as safe, clean water and accessible roads.

How best to bring an EVD outbreak under control before it spreads globally led some to suggest the use of big data analytics as a useful tool. One simple example was the surveillance of mobile phone data from phone masts during the outbreak to map calls to helplines, showing where treatment centres could be most effectively introduced. Phones themselves could be targeted with health advice. Big data analytics could also be used in future for contact tracing (of those infected or at risk), observing population movements into and out of 'hot zones', tracking movements across borders using data from airports, ports, railways and vehicle identification systems, and collating mobile phone and social media activity. All of these sources provide essential information for health agencies and governments trying to understand the shape of an outbreak in order to bring it under

control. Big data analytics is able to collate an enormous amount of data from multiple sources to build a more comprehensive picture, adding to existing methods of information gathering (Wall 2014).

See [chapter 19](#), 'The Media', for a more detailed discussion of the digital revolution.

Of course, big data and digital devices cannot, in themselves, control potential pandemics, which will always require concerted international efforts from a range of government and non-governmental agencies on the ground, but they do have the potential to make a significant contribution, which was simply not available before the digital revolution in communications. So, while globalizing processes have increased the potential for health epidemics to turn more quickly into dangerous pandemics, the same processes of global communication create the possibility that this trend can be countered. This point reminds us of Karl Marx's (1970 [1859]: 21) maxim that 'Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.'

Seven months after the 2014 Ebola outbreak began, the international response was criticized as too slow, and a shortage of at least 3,000 healthcare beds was identified in Liberia and Sierra Leone. The former UN General Secretary Kofi Annan declared himself 'bitterly disappointed' at the response from developed countries, suggesting that international assistance picked up pace only once the virus had reached the USA and Western Europe (BBC News 2014b). The Ebola epidemic demonstrates the stark disparity in available healthcare between the Global South and North and, consequently, the differing levels of risk for people based on their geographical location. Indeed,

health inequalities along lines of social class, gender, ethnicity and disability are the focus of many empirical studies of health and illness.

The concept of 'risk' has become a central one in sociological research into lifestyles, health and medicine since the late twentieth century, and the emergence of HIV/AIDS was instrumental in creating a more 'risk-aware' population. Indeed, Ulrich Beck (1999) argued that we are moving into a 'world risk society' in which people will spend more effort and use more resources dealing with risks than ever before. If this is the case, then, as the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated, anticipating pandemics and planning for them should be one of the most important tasks for all governments and international organizations.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Think about why it was that Ebola posed much less of a threat to the populations of developed countries. What practical measures could be taken to prevent or reduce the impact of Ebola in the Global South?

Health inequalities

The twentieth century saw a significant rise in life expectancy for the industrialized countries, while in 2016 the WHO estimated average life expectancy at birth for the global population at seventy-two years. Of course, such blunt averages hide major inequalities of health (see chapter 14, 'The Life Course'). Many of the advances in public health have been attributed to the efficacy of modern medicine, and there is a widely held assumption that medical research will continue to be successful in finding the biological causes of disease and developing effective treatments. On this view, as medical knowledge and expertise grow, we will see sustained improvements in public health. Although this perspective has been extremely influential, it is unsatisfactory for sociologists. Improvements in public health over the past century cannot conceal the fact that health and illness are not distributed evenly. Some social groups enjoy much better health than others, and health inequalities are linked to larger socio-economic patterns.

Sociologists and specialists in social epidemiology – the study of the distribution and incidence of disease and illness within populations – try to explain the link between health and variables such as social class, gender, race, age and geography. Although most scholars acknowledge the correlation between health and social inequalities, there is no agreement about the nature of this connection or how health inequalities should be addressed. One of the main areas of debate concerns the relative importance of *individual variables*, such as lifestyle, behaviour and diet, and *environmental* or *structural* factors, such as social class position, income distribution and poverty. In this section we look at health variations according to social class, gender and ethnicity and review some competing explanations for their persistence.

Social class and health

Research studies consistently report a clear relationship between patterns of mortality and morbidity (illness) and social class position.

In fact, Cockerham (2020: 2) argues that 'social factors do more than influence health for large populations and the lived experience of illness for individuals; rather, such factors have a direct causal effect on physical health and illness. Social class or socioeconomic status (SES) is the strongest predictor of health, disease causation, and longevity in medical sociology.' In the UK, an influential nationwide study – the Black Report (DHSS 1980) – was important in publicizing the extent of class-based health inequalities, which many people found shocking in such a wealthy country. Although there was a trend towards better health in society as a whole, significant disparities existed across classes, affecting such health indicators as birth weight, blood pressure, risk of chronic illness, death from accidents, and more. Drever and Whitehead (1997) report that people from higher socio-economic groups are, on average, healthier, taller and stronger and live longer than those in lower socio-economic positions.

A longitudinal analysis by the Office for National Statistics (ONS 2015c) looked at health inequalities in England and Wales between 1982 to 2011, when the general life expectancy of all social classes was rising (see figures 10.4 and 10.5). Surprisingly, perhaps, the study found that inequalities in life expectancy also *widened* over most of this period, with the gap in male life expectancy between routine workers (class 7) and higher management/professionals (class 1), rising from 4.9 years in the period 1982–6 to 6.2 years in 1997–2001. In 2002–6, average life expectancy at birth for men in class 1 was 80.4 years, compared to 74.6 years for those in class 7. Since the 1997–2001 period there is evidence that health inequality between class 1 and class 7 has at least started to narrow, though the gap remains higher than it was in 1982–6 (ibid.: 12).

On average, women live longer today than in 1982–6 (82.4 years in 2007–11, 77.9 years in 1982–6), but the increase in life expectancy at birth for women has been smaller than that for men. Hence, the longstanding gap between life expectancy for men and women has narrowed since the 1980s. Life expectancy differences between women in the top and bottom classes has also increased since 1982–6 and, unlike the male pattern, continued to widen over the first decade of the

twenty-first century. Average life expectancy for women in Class 1 was 85.2 years in 2007–11 compared with 80.8 years for those in class 7.

An analysis of 2011 Census data also found a large 'health gap' between class 1 and class 7 based on *self-reported* health conditions. More than 30 per cent of men and women in class 7 reported their own health as 'not good', with less than 15 per cent of those in class 1 doing the same (ONS 2013). This is, of course, a subjective measure of people's health, but it gains support from other studies showing a clear class gradient in male deaths from lung cancer, drug dependency, diabetes and accidents (White et al. 2003). A similar class gradient is evident in mental health, with research finding that 'those in the lowest social class are over twice as likely to suffer from a neurotic disorder as those in the highest social class' (Nettleton 2013: 159).

Social scientists have established that the class position into which we are born is a major determinant of how long, on average, we can expect to live. Studies from other developed countries also consistently report a clear class gradient to health and life expectancy. Yet, despite a growing amount of research, scholars have not been entirely successful in locating the actual mechanisms that connect the two. Several competing explanations have been advanced for the causes behind the well-established correlation.
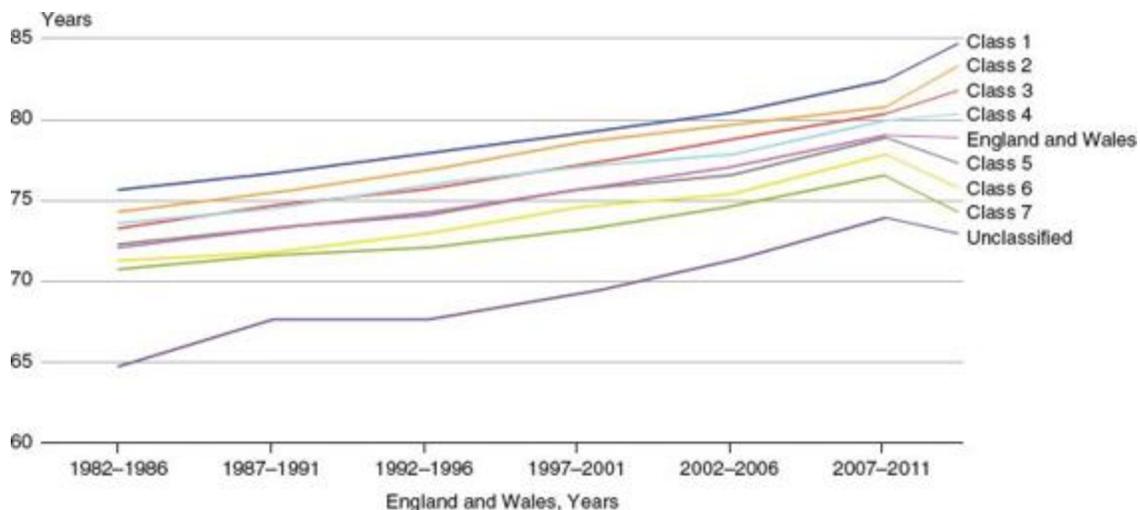
Figure 10.5 Male life expectancy at birth for expanded National Statistics socio-economic classes (including the unclassified) and for England and Wales, 1982–6 and 2007–11
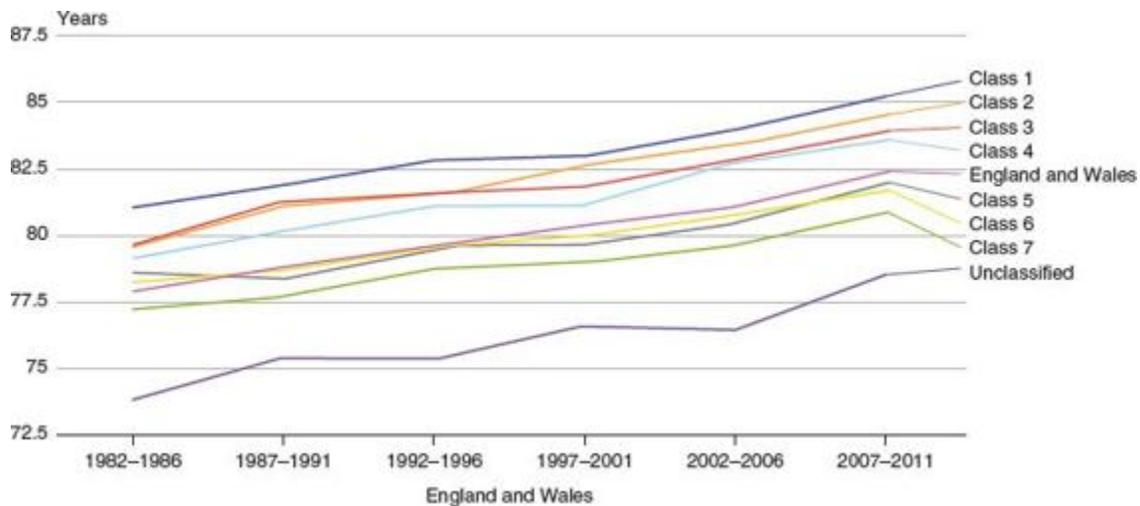
Figure 10.6 Female life expectancy at birth for expanded National Statistics socio-economic classes (including the unclassified) and for England and Wales, 1982–6 and 2007–11

Source: ONS (2015c: 18).

The Black Report adopted a *materialist* explanation, which sees the cause of health inequalities in large social structures, such as poverty, wealth and income distribution, unemployment, housing, and poor working conditions. Health inequalities are therefore understood as the result of material deprivation, and reducing them requires addressing these root causes. Consequently, the Black Report suggested the need for a comprehensive anti-poverty strategy and improvements in education.

The Conservative government (1979–90) adopted an alternative focus based on cultural and behavioural explanation, emphasizing the importance of freely chosen individual lifestyles. For example, lower social classes are more likely to engage in unhealthy behaviours such as smoking, eating a poor diet and consuming high levels of alcohol, and the policy concentrated on public health campaigns to influence lifestyles. Anti-smoking initiatives, healthy eating and exercise programmes are examples of efforts to change behaviour, exhorting individuals to take responsibility for their own health. Yet critics argue that this ignores the structural constraint of low income. Fresh fruit and vegetables, for instance, are more expensive than foods that are high in

fat and cholesterol, and the highest consumption of 'healthy' food is, unsurprisingly, among high-income groups.

The next Labour government (1997–2010) acknowledged both cultural and material influences on health (see figure 10.7), and their Acheson Report (Acheson 1998) confirmed that inequality had worsened since the 1970s. As a result of linking health with unemployment, substandard housing and education, it also proposed steps in order to address not just the symptoms of poor health but its causes.

In 2003 an initiative targeting areas with the highest levels of deprivation was launched, which covered 28 per cent of the national population and 44 per cent of black and other minority ethnic groups. The aim was to achieve a 10 per cent reduction in class-based health inequality in infant mortality and life expectancy by 2010 (DoH 2003). But by early 2009 only 19 per cent of the selected areas were on target, and in 66 per cent the health inequality gap was widening compared with the national average (Health Inequalities Unit 2009). But why? It seems that wealthier social classes are more likely to act on the messages of public health-promotions, so their health improves faster than that of the poorer classes. Paradoxically, general health-promotion campaigns may widen rather than narrow health inequality, which remains characterized by structured social class divisions.
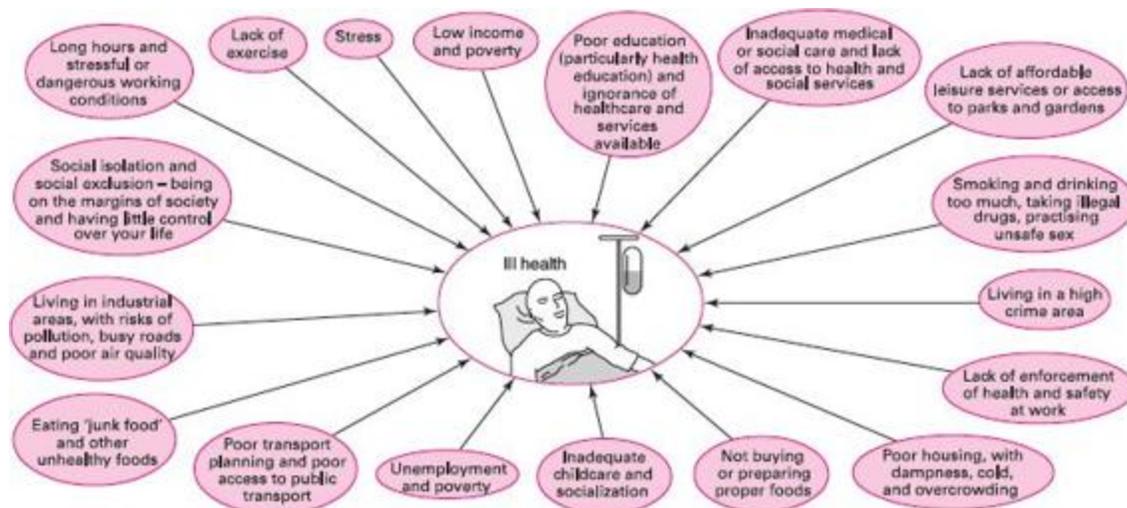
Figure 10.7 The cultural and material influences on health

Source: Browne (2005: 410).

Gender and health

Disparities in health between men and women have been noted in many research studies. For example, women generally enjoy a longer life expectancy than men in almost every country in the world (UNDP 2004), while causes of death and patterns of illness in men and women exhibit key differences. For instance, as we saw above, men are far more likely to suffer serious health damage or death from Covid-19. In the developed world, although it affects men more than women, heart disease is still the most frequent killer of both men and women under the age of sixty-five. Men have higher rates of death as a result of accidents and violence and are also more prone to drug and alcohol dependency.

Material circumstances influence women's health status, but this has traditionally been a difficult factor to gauge as the evidence on women's health is not as extensive as that on men. Many studies classify women according to the social class of their husbands, thereby producing a distorted picture of women's health (see chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class'). We do know, however, that women are more likely to seek medical attention and have higher rates of self-reported illness than men. Yet this pattern is not repeated across the life course. Using ONS data for England and Wales, in 2002 twice as many women as men aged sixteen to forty-four visited a doctor in the two weeks before the survey, but this gap virtually disappeared in the forty-five to sixty-four age range (Nettleton 2013: 168). It has been suggested that much of the gender difference among those aged sixteen to forty-four can be accounted for by routine health visits related to reproduction rather than indicating more ill health (MacFarlane 1990).

The gendered pattern is different in South Asian countries such as Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, where the life expectancy differential is greatly reduced (Arber and Thomas 2005). Explanatory factors here include conflict and wars, nutritional deficiencies, disadvantages related to lower social status, and limited access to medical services for women (Cockerham 2020).

Women in the developed countries report twice as much anxiety and depression as men, and, according to some scholars, the multiple roles which women perform – domestic work, childcare and professional responsibilities – increase their levels of stress, contributing to higher rates of illness. Doyal (1995) suggested that women's lives are inherently different from men's in terms of domestic work, sexual reproduction, childbearing and mothering, and regulating fertility through birth control, though this may be changing as more women enter the workforce. Doyal argues that what matters in the shaping of women's health is the cumulative effect of these tasks. Therefore, any analysis of women's health should focus on the interaction between social, psychological and biological influences.

Oakley and her colleagues (1994) noted that social support – such as counselling services, hotlines or home visits – can act as a 'buffer' against the negative health consequences of stress commonly experienced by women, particularly working-class women. Other studies have shown that social support is important in helping people to adjust to disease and illness and that women are more likely to form and maintain self-help communities, including female communities in cyberspace, such as the mothers' forum mumsnet.com (Ell 1996; Drentea and Moren-Cross 2005). Graham (1987, 1994) studied the effects of stress on the health of white working-class women, highlighting the fact that those at the lower socio-economic end of the spectrum have less access to support networks in times of life crisis than do middle-class women. Working-class women tend to encounter life crises such as job loss, divorce, eviction from housing or the death of a child more often than other groups but, generally, have weaker coping skills and fewer outlets for their anxiety. Not only is the resulting stress harmful both physically and psychologically, but some of the coping strategies adopted are damaging. For example, smoking is

a way of reducing tension when personal and material resources are stretched to breaking point. Thus it increases the health risk for women and their children while simultaneously allowing them to cope under difficult circumstances.

There is some research that shows men are not as vigilant about their own health and tend to ignore health problems for longer. Young men have traditionally engaged in more risk-taking behaviour, such as speeding, drug-taking, early-age sexual activity, getting drunk, and so on, than do women (Lupton 1999). However, this pattern has been changing somewhat over recent decades. For instance, until quite recently smoking was overwhelmingly associated with men, but this is no longer the case; by the early twenty-first century, among young adults in the UK, women were more likely to smoke than men (Nettleton 2020: 197).

One of the main explanations for the shifting gendered pattern of risky health behaviour is the changing situation in the economy. More women have moved into the same employment sectors as men and, as a result, have become consumers to be targeted by advertisers. Annandale (2009: 8–9) suggests that the clearly defined gender identities of the 1950s – male breadwinners and female homemakers – have become blurred in a 'new single system' of patriarchal capitalism. Yet this does not mean that gender equality has been or is being achieved. Rather, the argument is that the old binary system of men's and women's roles has broken down, leaving a complex, uncertain situation with many new freedoms for women but also new controls. For example, as more young women participate in the night-time economy, consume more alcohol and smoke, they are redefined as irresponsible and unattractive 'ladettes' determined to outdo their male counterparts in bad behaviour. Hence, increasing diversity and fluidity in gender relations is tempered by the continuing salience of the old ideology of 'different spheres'.

One area where women's health *has* been found to be worse than men's is in some minority ethnic groups. Not only is self-reported illness higher among ethnic minority groups than in the general population, but within some groups, notably Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities, women report more ill health than men (Cooper 2002).

Such findings illustrate the complexity produced by intersecting social inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity, and we can expect future research to become increasingly sensitive to intersectionality.

The concept of intersectionality is discussed in more detail in [chapter 8](), 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

Ethnicity and health

The incidence of certain illnesses is higher among individuals from African-Caribbean and Asian backgrounds. Mortality from liver cancer, tuberculosis and diabetes is higher among these populations than among whites. African Caribbeans have higher than average rates of hypertension and sickle cell anaemia (an inherited disorder affecting red blood cells), while people from the Indian subcontinent experience higher mortality from heart disease. Yet these instances tell us very little about the persistent ethnic patterning of health and illness. The evidence from a growing number of sociological research studies is that in countries of the Global North, such as the USA and the UK, 'social and economic inequalities, underpinned by racism, are fundamental causes of ethnic inequalities in health' (Nazroo 2003: 277). The Covid-19 pandemic showed this clearly, as people from black and minority ethnic groups (BAME) had higher death rates than whites.

Although health inequalities are ethnically patterned, explanations of this relationship have been hotly contested. Some scholars have used cultural and individualistic accounts rather than social-structural perspectives to explain health inequality across ethnic groups. In a similar way to cultural explanations of class-based health inequalities, emphasis is placed on individual and group lifestyles that are considered to result in poorer health. These are often seen as linked to religious or cultural beliefs, such as dietary and cooking habits or consanguinity (the practice of intermarriage within families at the level

of second cousins). Critics argue that cultural explanations fail to identify the real problems facing ethnic minorities in the industrialized societies – namely, the structural inequalities, racism and discrimination encountered in healthcare systems.

Indeed, institutional racism has been found in the provision of healthcare (Alexander 1999). Minority ethnic groups may experience unequal or problematic access to health services, language barriers can present difficulties if information cannot be relayed effectively, and culturally specific understandings of illness and treatment are often not considered by professionals within health services. The UK National Health Service has been criticized for not requiring more awareness of cultural and religious beliefs among its staff and for paying less attention to diseases that occur predominantly in the non-white population.

Social-structural explanations for the ethnic patterning of health in many European societies focus on the social context in which African Caribbeans and Asian people live. These groups frequently experience multiple disadvantages which can be harmful to their health, among them poor or overcrowded housing conditions, high rates of unemployment, and over-representation in hazardous, low-paying occupations. In this way, some explanations foreground the socio-economic causes of ethnic inequalities in health rather than focusing purely on the experience of racism and racial discrimination. In short: 'what makes race most important with respect to health … is its close association with being affluent or poor' (Cockerham 2020: 19).

However, Evandrou et al. (2016: 660) found that Pakistani and Bangladeshi elders are more likely to experience higher levels of deprivation and lower incomes than other social groups, and that this may be due to 'the accumulation of risks over the life course and the long-term consequences of exposure to hazards (such as socio-economic disadvantage, poor healthcare experience and racial discrimination) in early life.' They accept that socio-economic factors play a role but note that, in a comparison of people within the same social class group, Indian, Bangladeshi and Pakistani elders self-report having worse health than white British individuals. Racial discrimination, in the form of violence, threats and discrimination or in

institutionalized forms such as poor housing and an over-representation in low-paid work, may therefore be seen to underpin and reinforce the disadvantaged socio-economic position of minority ethnic groups.

Institutional racism is discussed in detail in [chapter 8](#), 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

Health and social cohesion

In [chapter 1](#) we saw that, for Durkheim, social solidarity is one of society's most crucial features. In his study of suicide, for example, he found that individuals and groups that were well integrated into society were less likely to take their own lives than others. In trying to unravel the causes of health inequalities today, a growing number of sociologists are turning their attention to the role of social cohesion in promoting good mental and physical health.

Richard Wilkinson (1996) argued that it is not the richest societies in the world that are the most healthy, but those in which income is distributed most evenly and levels of social integration are highest. In surveying empirical data from countries around the world, he found a clear relationship between mortality rates and patterns of income distribution. Inhabitants of countries such as Japan and Sweden, some of the most egalitarian in the world, enjoyed better levels of health on average than citizens of countries where the gap between the rich and the poor was more pronounced, such as the United States and the UK.

In Wilkinson's view, the widening gap in income distribution undermines social cohesion and makes it more difficult for people to manage risks and challenges. Heightened social isolation and the failure to cope with stress are reflected in health indicators. Social factors – the strength of social contacts, ties within communities, the availability of

social support, a sense of security – are the main determinants of the relative health of a society. During the 2010 British election campaign, the Conservative Party leader David Cameron drew on the theme of Britain as a 'broken society' that needed fixing. But according to Wilkinson and Pickett (2010: 5):

> Long before the financial crisis which gathered pace in the later part of 2008, British politicians commenting on the decline of community or the rise of various forms of anti-social behaviour would sometimes refer to our 'broken society' … and while the broken society was often blamed on the behaviour of the poor, the broken economy was widely attributed to the rich … But the truth is that both the broken society and the broken economy resulted from the growth of inequality.

Wilkinson and Pickett's thesis was enthusiastically received by some politicians and academics, who agreed that an exclusive emphasis on market relations and the drive towards economic growth has failed many members of society. Others criticized Wilkinson's work on the grounds that it failed to demonstrate a causal relationship between income inequality and poor health. Judge (1995) re-analysed Wilkinson's earlier data, employing standard measures of inequality in use at the time, and found that the apparent connection between levels of inequality and life expectancy simply did not exist. It is also argued that Wilkinson and Pickett's choice of countries for comparison is highly selective and methodologically flawed. For example, Japan is included but not Singapore or Hong Kong. The latter two countries are more unequal than Japan, yet they experience similar health and well-being benefits. Similarly, Wilkinson and Pickett put Portugal's relatively poor health performance down to its high level of inequality, but Snowdon (2010: 14) argues that it is, in fact, the poorest country in their analysis, and what it really suffers from is a lack of material prosperity. Some recent evidence also shows that the suggested pattern does not hold across the Global South either.

The 'Wilkinson thesis' from 1996 onwards has been described, perhaps unfairly, as 'a doctrine in search of data' (Eberstadt and Satel 2004: 118) rather than as a thesis that is well supported by the evidence. But Wilkinson and Pickett (2018) have continued to expand the thesis,

looking at how the more equal societies develop lower levels of stress and higher levels of well-being, so we can expect these debates to continue into the future.

The sociology of disability

The biomedical model of health has long underpinned the way that disability has conventionally been understood – as an illness or abnormality that is a personal tragedy for the individual. Recent social trends leading to a backlash against the biomedical model have also been part of a strong challenge to medical and individualistic understandings of disability. In this section, we explore the dominant 'individual model' of disability and see how it has been challenged, notably by disabled people themselves, through the development of a 'social model' of disability. But a good place to start is with the language of disability.

Sociologists argue that our awareness and understanding of social issues is partly shaped by the very words we use and the way in which we discuss disability. The word 'handicapped', for example, has largely fallen out of use because it was previously associated with 'cap in hand' – charity and begging. Other words used originally to describe certain impairments are rejected because they became hurtful insults – terms such as 'spastic' or 'cripple' are examples. And some metaphors in everyday use, such as 'turning a blind eye' or 'a deaf ear', have been criticized because they imply social exclusion from the mainstream. As we shall see, even the word 'disability' is subject to criticism.

The individual model of disability

Historically, an individual model of disability has been dominant in Western societies. This contends that individual mental and bodily impairments are the main causes of the problems experienced by disabled people. Bodily 'abnormality' is seen as causing functional limitation, which then leads to 'disability'. Underpinning the individual model is a 'personal tragedy approach' in which disabled people are seen as unfortunate victims of chance events. Medical specialists play a central role in the individual model because it is their job to offer curative and rehabilitative diagnosis. For this reason, the individual model is often described as a 'medical model', as it illustrates the power

of the medical expert over disabled people's lives. Over recent decades, the individual model of disability has lost much ground.

The social model of disability

An important early challenge to the individual model was Paul Hunt's *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, in which he argued that 'the problem of disability lies not only in the impairment of function and its effects on us individually, but also in the area of our relationship with "normal" people' (1966: 146). Hunt was a leading activist in the early years of the disability movement in Britain and became a founding member of the Union of Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS). In its manifesto, UPIAS (1976: 14) developed a radical alternative to the individual model, stating that there was a crucial distinction between 'impairment' and 'disability':

- *Impairment*: Lacking part or all of a limb, or having a defective limb, organ or mechanism of the body.

- *Disability*: The disadvantage or restriction of activities caused by a contemporary social organization, which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from participation in the mainstream of social activities.

UPIAS largely accepted the definition of physical 'impairment' as a biomedical property of individuals, though this was later extended to include non-physical, sensory and intellectual forms of impairment. Disability, however, was defined in social terms, which challenged the conventional understanding of the word. Disability was now understood not as an individual problem but in terms of the social barriers and oppression that people with impairments faced as a result of society's organization. Factors such as building construction, inaccessible public transport systems, and the discriminatory attitudes of employers and the non-disabled population effectively 'disable' people with a range of impairments.

Is this Paralympic sprinter 'disabled'? Which definition of health from the start of this chapter would 'fit' Paralympians?

Mike Oliver turned around the assumptions in the individual model of disability by rewriting the questions used by the UK Office of Population, Censuses and Surveys (OPCS) in the 1980s to assess 'disability' (see 'Using your sociological imagination' 10.3). Oliver (1983) was the first theorist to make explicit the distinction between the individual and the social model of disability. The social model was given further academic credibility in the work of Vic Finkelstein (1980, 1981), Colin Barnes (1991) and Oliver himself (1990, 1996).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

10.3 Applying the social model to assumptions in the OPCS questions

OPCS question	Oliver's question
'Can you tell me what is wrong with you?'	'Can you tell me what is wrong with society?'
'What complaint causes you difficulty in holding, gripping or turning things?'	'What defects in the design of everyday equipment like jars, bottles and tins cause you difficulty in holding them?'
'Are your difficulties in understanding people due mainly to a hearing problem?'	'Are your difficulties in understanding people due mainly to their inability to communicate with you?'
'Do you have a scar, blemish or deformity which limits your daily activities?'	'Do other people's reactions to any scar, blemish or deformity you may have limit your daily activities?'
'Have you attended a special school because of a long-term health problem or disability?'	'Have you attended a special school because of your education authority's policy of sending people with your health problem/disability to such places?'
'Does your health problem/disability prevent you from going out as often or as far as you would like?'	'What is it about the local environment that makes it difficult for you to get about in your neighbourhood?'
'Does your health problem/disability make it difficult for you to travel by bus?'	'Are there any transport or financial problems which prevent you from going out as often or as far as you would like?'

OPCS question	Oliver's question
'Does your health problem/disability affect your work in any way at present?'	'Do you have problems at work because of the physical environment or the attitudes of others?'
'Does your health problem/disability mean that you need to live with relatives or someone else who can help or look after you?'	'Are community services so poor that you need to rely on relatives or someone else to provide you with the right level of personal assistance?'
'Does your present accommodation have any adaptations because of your health problem/disability?'	'Did the poor design of your house mean that you had to have it adapted to suit your needs?'

THINKING CRITICALLY

Exactly what changes would be needed to bring about the full participation of disabled people in relation to communication, schooling, employment, public services and housing? Can you make an *economic* as well as a moral case for such changes?

Social model theorists are interested in explaining how the social and cultural barriers faced by disabled people have developed. Some theorists, influenced by Marx, argue that a historical materialist understanding of disability is needed (see chapters 1 and 3 for more on materialism). Oliver, for example, argues that the severe restrictions placed on disabled people's full participation in society can be traced back to the Industrial Revolution, when they were excluded from the labour market. The first capitalist workshops based payment on individual waged labour and, as the process developed, 'so many [disabled people] were unable to keep or retain jobs that they became a social problem for the capitalist state whose initial response to all social problems was harsh deterrence and institutionalization' (Oliver

1996: 28). Even today, disabled people's presence in the workforce remains small despite legal measures aimed at preventing disability discrimination.

Evaluation of the social model

The social model has been enormously influential in shaping the way that we think about disability today. It has gained global influence and is described as 'the big idea' of the British disability movement (Hasler 1993). In focusing on the removal of social barriers to full participation, the social model redefines disability as the result of oppression, a move that many disabled people found liberating (Beresford and Wallcraft 1997). This political strategy led some to argue that disabled people had formed 'a new social movement' (Oliver and Zarb 1989).

New social movements are discussed further in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Since the late 1980s, several criticisms have been made of the social model from those working in disability studies and mainstream sociology. First, it is seen as neglecting the often painful or uncomfortable *experience* of impairment, which is a central part of many disabled people's lives. Shakespeare and Watson (2002: 11) argue that 'We are not just disabled people, we are also people with impairments, and to pretend otherwise is to ignore a major part of our biographies.' Against this criticism, defenders of the social model say that, rather than denying everyday experiences of impairment, it merely seeks to shift the focus of attention onto the social barriers raised against disabled people.

Second, many people accept they have impairments but do not wish to be labelled as 'disabled'. In a UK survey of people claiming disability benefits, fewer than half chose to define themselves as disabled. Many rejected the label because they perceived their health problems as

illnesses, not disabilities, or because they did not think that they were ill enough to be so categorized (DWP 2002). However, Barnes (2003) points out that, in a society where disability is still associated with abnormality and social deviance, it is not surprising that people with impairments reject the label 'disabled', which carries a stigma. Indeed, the social model has been influential in challenging the stigmatizing of disability.

Third, many medical sociologists reject the social model, arguing that the distinction between impairment and disability on which it rests is false. They argue that *both* disability *and* impairment are socially constructed and interrelated. Shakespeare and Watson (2002) claim that the division between impairment and disability collapses when one asks the question 'Where does impairment end and disability start?' In some cases it may be straightforward – a failure to design suitable wheelchair access in a building clearly creates a disabling barrier for wheelchair users. However, there are many more instances where it is impossible to remove all the sources of disability because they are not caused by oppressive conditions in society. For example, to be impaired by constant pain or significant intellectual limitation disables the individual from full participation in society in a way that cannot be removed by modifications or social changes. Therefore, any full account must take into account disability caused by the impairments themselves and not just those created by the organization of society.

Supporters of the social model argue that this last claim blurs the distinction between disability and impairment and is rooted in the biomedical model underlying the older, individual model of disability. The social model does not deny that impairment can be the cause of pain or that there are things an individual may not be able to do solely because of a specific impairment. Indeed, Carol Thomas (1999, 2002), an advocate of the social model, uses the idea of 'impairment effects' to bring in the ensuing psycho-emotional implications of impairment for disabled people.

Criticism of the social model from within the disabled people's movement may seem strange, given that this model originated in discussions among movement activists themselves. But this internal

controversy is perhaps best seen as the maturing of debate and the success of the social model in reshaping the meaning of disability as a political rather than a medical concept.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

10.4 'Cripping' theory and politics

As debates within disabled people's movements develop over time, some activists and scholars have begun to shift disability discourse away from 'impairments' and 'disabilities'. One example of this is known as crip theory, which, like queer theory, critically examines literary and artistic products as well as political discourses and everyday life, uncovering the deeply embedded and unspoken 'ableist' assumptions within these (McRuer 2006). For example, Davidson (2008: 168) notes that discussions of economic globalization are still littered with casual references to illness and impairment: 'countries suffer from *crippling* debt; national leaders who are *deaf* to the needs of their people; poverty as a *cancer* spreading throughout a region'. Inclusion of disability alongside health and illness within this chapter may also be seen as embodying the assumption that disability is primarily about 'health' and 'illness' rather than, say, politics or social movements.

Use of the term 'crip' is then a reclaiming and reinvention of the word 'cripple', previously used in derogatory ways to denigrate disabled people, particularly those with visible physical impairments (McRuer 2012). It is also a term that is often used among disabled people as an ironic form of self-identification which promotes in-group solidarity. Disability is seen as an identity in its own right, not as secondary to 'normal' able-bodied identities. Crip theory draws from queer theory, suggesting that 'crip' is a performance, not a thing (for queer theory, see chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality'). For example, in order to gain access to services or state help there is often an assessment, during which people have to actively 'perform disability' (Rydström 2012). Hence 'cripping' – laying bare the underlying discrimination of apparently neutral or universal social phenomena – can be an effective form of disability activism in which disabled people may refuse or 'unwelcome' the

wellmeaning advice, interventions and treatments that reinforce rather than challenge discrimination.

However, crip theory has been criticized by some. Bone (2017) argues that a real problem with crip theory is its failure to connect academic discourse to the real-world lives of disabled people. Similarly, Sherry (2013) argues that '"Crip" is the new fashionable term among disability studies academics. It has become particularly trendy among those whose focus is literary studies. However, I think that if they spent more time with disabled people, and less time thinking about disability in terms of textual analysis and narrative, they would have a different perspective.' He suggests that many disabled people find the term 'crip' offensive.

For Jenks (2019) it is a mistake to sideline the concept of impairment, which, he maintains, is vital both to disability studies and for any effective disability politics. Sherry (2013) argues that The British social model has been criticized at length for its simplistic impairment/disability divide…. But what has been forgotten, in the rush to move away from the British model, is that these concepts came from a deep engagement with disabled people. It was a disability organization which came up with the impairment/disability divide: the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation. U.S. disability studies has no such community bulwark against which to measure its key concepts and terms. If a concept in disability studies – such as 'crip' theory – can gain such wide usage in the academy alongside such disparagement in the community, there is a need to change the academy.

In similar ways to those in which LGBTQ+ groups reclaimed the previously offensive word 'queer', disabled people do the same with the term 'crip'.

Nonetheless, many young scholars in this field, particularly in Canada and the USA, have enthusiastically embraced crip theory, and it seems likely to be further developed in the coming years.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> The social model distinguished impairment from disability in order to show that social norms and arrangements 'disabled' people with certain impairments. Why do some find this distinction unhelpful for disability politics? How might a 'crip politics' be more effective?

Disability, law and public policy

Given that the social model of disability emerged in the UK, it is instructive to look at the way British legislation has developed, partly as

a result of the campaigns of the disabled people's movement.

The Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) was passed in 1995, giving disabled people legal protection from discrimination in several areas, including employment and access to goods and services. Further legislation was introduced in 1999 that led to the creation of the Disability Rights Commission (DRC), set up to work towards 'the elimination of discrimination against disabled people', and a new DDA covering more areas and activities was introduced in 2005. On 1 October 2007, the DRC was subsumed under a new national human rights body, the Equality and Human Rights Commission. Then, in 2010, a more general Equality Act was passed which replaced most of the previous DDA and included new rights for the carers and parents of disabled people not to suffer discrimination.

The 1995 DDA defined a disabled person as 'anyone with a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect upon their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities', and this definition was carried forward into the 2010 Equality Act. It covers, for example, people with mental health issues as well as those with facial disfigurements and avoids the common misconception that disability is primarily the result of congenital impairments and/or diseases that existed at, or usually before, birth. In fact, only around 17 per cent of disabled people in the UK were born with impairments, and the percentage of the population that is disabled increases with age (Papworth Trust 2013; see figure 10.8). Note that this definition diverges from the social model, as it maintains that it is impairments themselves which bring about disability.

Under the Equality Act definition, in 2011–12 some 11.6 million people in the UK were disabled – about 19 per cent of the population, the same proportion as in 2002–3. Of these, 5.7 million were adults of working age, 5.1 million were over state pension age and 800,000 were children (DWP 2014). People with impairments linked to disability still belong to one of the most disadvantaged groups in the UK. They are more likely to be out of work than the able-bodied, and those who are employed tend to earn less. Yet disability-related expenditure by governments is high compared with spending in many other areas. The wealthiest

countries spend at least twice as much on disability-related programmes as they do on unemployment benefits (OECD 2005).
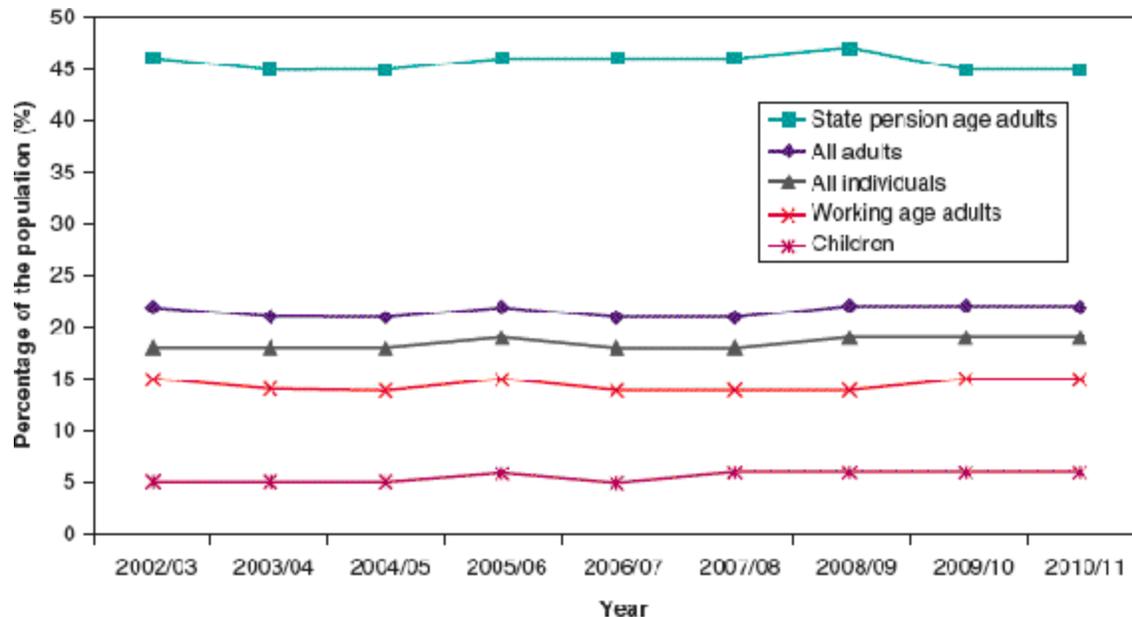
Figure 10.8 Disability prevalence in the UK by age, 2002/3–2010/11 (percentage of age group)

Source: DWP (2012: 79).

Disability around the world

In 2018, the WHO estimated that over 1 billion people around the world lived with some form of disability, around 15 per cent of the global population (WHO 2018b). This is a significantly higher proportion than 1970s estimates of around 10 per cent (WHO 2011: 7–8). The global prevalence of disability is rising as a result of ageing populations and the increase in chronic conditions, and around 80 per cent of disabled people live in the Global South (Iriate et al. 2016: 3). The main causes of impairments in *developed* countries are chronic disease and long-term impairments, while in *developing countries* the main causes are poverty, inadequate sanitation, poor diet and bad housing. Injuries, such as broken bones, will often result in long-term impairment in the Global South, which would not occur if treatment and rehabilitation facilities had been available. Iron deficiency (anaemia) and chronic infections of the pelvis are also major causes of impairment, and it has been estimated that around 250,000 children

lose their sight each year because their diet lacks Vitamin A, found in green vegetables (Charlton 1998). War and its aftermath – such as uncleared landmines – also result in many impairments. Disability in the Global South looks very different from that which exists in the North.

In 2006, the UN noted that only a minority of countries – forty-five – had introduced legislation to protect the rights of disabled people. In the majority of countries, disabled people did not have equal rights with the rest of the population. In India (a country with anti-discrimination laws), of around 70 million people with disabilities, only 100,000 or so were in employment in 2004. In the USA, just 35 per cent of working-age people with disabilities were employed, compared with 78 per cent of the non-disabled population (UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities 2006).

Clearly, anti-discriminatory laws and policies are unevenly distributed across the world, and many disabled people continue to be denied full citizenship in their own country. In an attempt to 'level up' provision for disabled people, the UN launched the first human rights treaty of the twenty-first century – the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – which aims to contribute to a global 'paradigm shift' in attitudes towards disabled people. On the opening day for signatures – 30 March 2007 – ninety-nine countries signed the Convention. By the end of 2016, 87 per cent of member states (168 countries and the EU) had ratified it (UN 2016).

The Convention commits national governments to 'develop and carry out policies, laws and administrative measures for securing the rights recognized in the Convention and to abolish laws, regulations, customs and practices that constitute discrimination.' It also guarantees that disabled people enjoy a right to life on an equal basis, ensures equal rights and advancement for women and girls with disabilities, and protects children with disabilities. And it sets out, for the first time, a global policy agenda to promote equal rights for disabled people. Disability politics has clearly moved a very long way in a short period of time, yet the modern world also makes demands that were not known in the past and which can create new disabling barriers.

Health and disability in a changing world

The very different experiences of health, illness, impairment and disability encountered by people around the world illustrate a central idea in this chapter: that our experience of our own bodies and interactions with others – whether able-bodied or disabled, sick or healthy – are shaped by the shifting social context. Today, we are more keenly aware of the global dimension of human existence, which brings home the gross inequalities of condition and opportunity, particularly between the Global North and South. Nowhere is this more evident than in the impact of pandemics such as Covid-19, HIV/AIDS and Ebola.

From the divergent impact of Covid-19 to the widely differing access to healthcare and experience of disability around the world, comparative sociological research provides some of the necessary evidence and understanding for governments and policy-makers. Interventions aimed at raising health standards demand reliable evidence, and sociologists can play their part by pointing out where spending and assistance are most needed. But sociologists can also help by providing their usual sober assessment of the wilder claims regarding the transformative power of digital technologies and novel treatments in the sphere of health, reminding everyone of the more prosaic fact that structured social inequalities continue to be the most significant predictor of people's health and illness.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. Provide three definitions of *health*. How should we define 'illness'?

2. What is meant by *biomedicine*? In what ways has this model been criticized?

3. Provide examples of two recent *innovative health technologies* and suggest some applications for each. Are there any foreseeable social problems that might arise if these technologies become widespread?

4. What social changes are said to be responsible for the rise of complementary and alternative therapies?

5. What is the difference between an *epidemic* and a *pandemic*? Why do some virologists argue that there will be more pandemics in the future?

6. What are the three 'main pillars' of the *sick role*? Is the sick role thesis irrelevant to the study of disability?

7. Using specific examples, describe how *social class* and *health* are closely related. How do the findings on class also help us to understand the poorer health of some minority ethnic groups in the UK?

8. 'The pattern of women's health is strongly linked to female biology.' Explain why sociologists do not accept this statement.

9. 'The *social model of disability* demands revolutionary changes to the organization of society.' What organizational and practical changes would the social model suggest are needed?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

In the UK the National Health Service has long been supported by politicians of all major political parties. Its funding is always a contentious issue during national elections, and public support for the service remains high, which was particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020. For politicians, though, the reverse is the case. Trust in politics and politicians has diminished over recent years, as an expenses scandal, a decade of austerity policies, and the drawn-out Brexit process have taken a toll on public opinion. But is there any relationship between people's health condition and their trust in politics? For example, do people in good health have more trust in politics than those in poor health? And does that pattern exist elsewhere? Read the article below, which tackles this question comparatively by looking at nineteen countries in Western Europe.

Mattila, M., and Rapeli, L. (2018) 'Just Sick of it? Health and Political Trust in Western Europe', *European Journal of Political Research*, 57(1): 116–34; https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12218.

1. What kind of study is this? What evidence is used and how has it been collected and collated?

2. Two 'theoretical possibilities' are suggested to explain the data. Clarify what they are and how each might be used in this context.

3. The survey indicates that there is a pattern in relation to level of health and political trust. Describe this pattern and any differences across the national contexts in the study.

4. What role is played in the level of political trust by people's *expectations* of public service provision?

5. Do you agree with the authors that, in the field of health and welfare, individual rather than collective experience influences opinion formation on political trust? Why might holding left-wing political views accentuate differences between those with good and those with poor health?

⚙ **<u>Thinking it through</u>**

It is well established that there is a social class gradient in health, with lower classes, on average, having poorer health and shorter life expectancy than higher ones. Some sociologists have argued that tackling poverty and its related material environments should be at the heart of government policy. However, a report by the King's Fund in the UK in 2012 found that people with no educational qualifications were five times more likely to smoke and drink large amounts of alcohol and to shun exercise and advice on a healthy diet.

Why should there be a correlation between lack of educational qualifications and unhealthy lifestyle choices? Suggest some theoretical links that might exist, focusing on why key health and lifestyle messages are more likely to be taken seriously and acted on by higher, middle-class socio-economic groups. Could health-promotion messages be made more effective, or should governments simply accept that some social groups are just not accessible via this route?

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Disabled people's movements have been successful in challenging discrimination in many areas of life, and disability is no longer seen as caused only, or primarily, by individual impairment or illness. At the same time, foetal screening tests are becoming less invasive and more accurate, providing prospective parents with more information about conditions such as Down's syndrome, which may lead some families to terminate a pregnancy.

In October 2016 a documentary film by the British actor Sally Phillips (whose son Olly has Down's syndrome) made a case *against* introducing non-invasive prenatal testing (NIPT) into the NHS. See the documentary at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=x16wGajCHIw or: https://marchforlife.org/world-without-down-syndrome/.

After watching the documentary, read this article:

Burch, L. (2017) 'A World without Down's Syndrome? Online Resistance on Twitter: #worldwithoutdowns and #justaboutcoping', *Disability and Society*, 32(7): https://doi.org/10.1080/20550340.2017.1330453.

1. The documentary maker in this case is clearly very 'involved' in the issue and the film has a message to communicate. What things do we learn about Down's syndrome from this programme that a more 'detached' approach may not be able to provide?

2. Considering Burch's article, how have the subsequent online debates challenged ideas of 'normality' in human development? What evidence is there that within these debates the social model of disability is embedded without being explicitly stated?

3. An *Observer* newspaper article noted that, when NIPT was introduced in Iceland, the termination rate for Down's syndrome rose to 100 per cent (McVeigh 2016). Does the NIPT promote a 'new eugenics' against certain categories of people or does it merely enhance women's right to choose?

⬚ **Further reading**

The sociology of health and illness is a well-established field, and there are many introductory textbooks. Two very good ones are Mildred Blaxter's (2010) *Health* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity), which has an excellent discussion of the concepts of health and illness, and Anne-Marie Barry and Chris Yuill's (2016) *Understanding the Sociology of Health: An Introduction* (4th edn, London: Sage), which provides a more up-to-date overview.

From here, try something that covers key debates, evidence and policy in more detail. For example, Sarah Nettleton's (2020) *The Sociology of Health and Illness* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity) and Kevin White's (2017) *An Introduction to the Sociology of Health and Illness* (3rd edn, London: Sage) are both comprehensive accounts.

Alexandra Howson's (2012) *The Body in Society: An Introduction* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity) and Bryan S. Turner's (2008) *The Body and Society* (3rd edn, London: Sage) cover this field well. For disability studies in sociology, see Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer's (2010) *Exploring Disability: A Sociological Introduction* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity) and John Swain, Sally French, Colin Barnes and Carol Thomas's (2013) very useful edited collection *Disabling Barriers – Enabling Environments* (3rd edn, London: Sage).

A useful reference work covering the field of health and illness is *Key Concepts in Medical Sociology* (2013), edited by Jonathan Gabe and Lee Monaghan (2nd edn, London: Sage).

For a collection of original readings on the sociology of health and the body, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ **Internet links**

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

European Observatory on Health Systems and Policies – information covering healthcare systems across Europe:
www.euro.who.int/en/about-us/partners/observatory

The World Health Organization – an excellent source of data on health and illness across the world:
www.who.int/en/

UNAIDS – United Nations AIDS programme with lots of resources and statistics:
www.unaids.org/en/

Innovative Health Technologies – research programme at the University of York, UK. See 'Projects by Theme':
www.york.ac.uk/res/iht/introduction.htm

The Wellcome Library, UK – very useful materials on the history of medicine and its role in society:
https://wellcomelibrary.org/

HealthTalk – a UK site that covers health matters from the patient perspective.
https://healthtalk.org/

The Disability Archive at the University of Leeds, UK – a large resource of material covering all aspects of disability:
https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/library/

The European Disability Forum – a non-governmental organization run by disabled people promoting equal rights in the EU:
www.edf-feph.org/

The UK's Equality and Human Rights Commission – resources here on disability discrimination and the Equality Act 2010:
www.equalityhumanrights.com/

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities – exactly what it says, with other material covering disability legislation across the world: www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/convention-on-the-rights-of-persons-with-disabilities.html

CHAPTER 11

POVERTY, SOCIAL EXCLUSION AND WELFARE
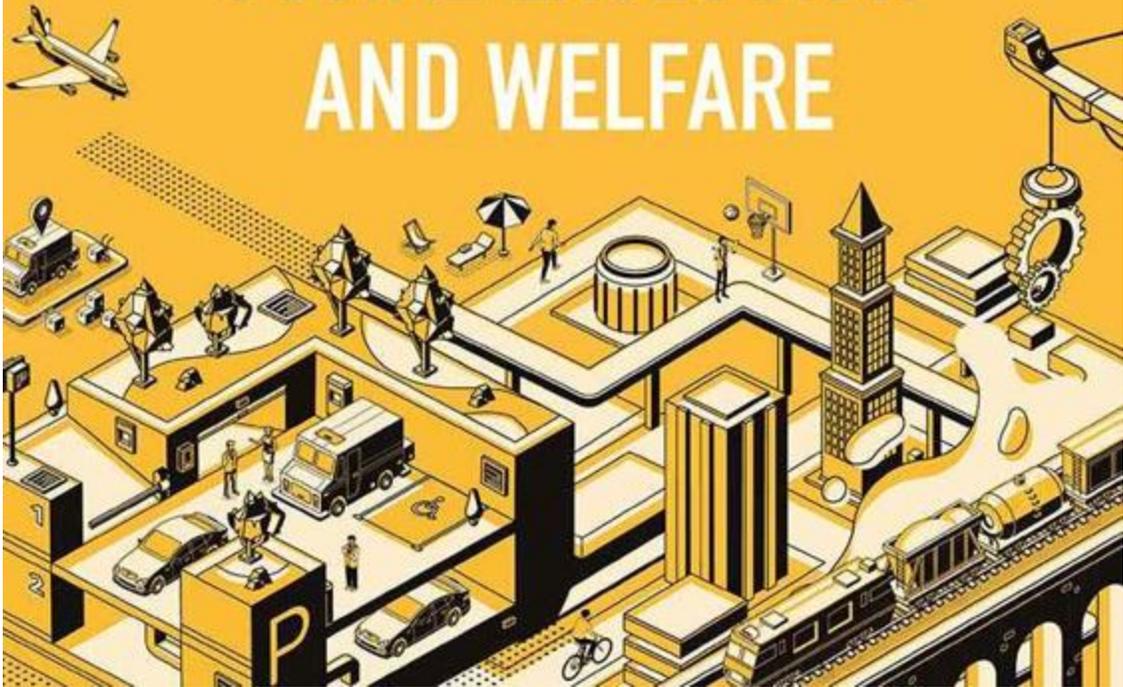
CONTENTS

Emergency accommodation in England for homeless people in desperate need now includes cramped rooms in guest houses as well as tiny units in converted office blocks and shipping containers (above).

Over recent years in London, Brighton, Cardiff and Bristol, bright, newly constructed accommodation units have sprung up that look for all the world as though they have been designed by self-build enthusiasts for one of the many popular TV programmes on architectural homebuilding and design. Yet these units are actually converted metal shipping containers intended as an innovative solution to the housing crisis facing many local councils. In the absence of an adequate stock of social housing, and amid rising levels of homelessness, some councils have entered into partnerships with private developers to build blocks of small units very quickly on council-owned land.

For some tenants, the shipping containers do indeed offer a temporary respite and may well be better than the unsafe and unhealthy rented flats and houses they left behind. For instance, 28-year-old Christine lives in Meath Court, West London, a block of converted shipping containers. 'I am not saying I want to live here forever, because really I

don't. But for the circumstances and choice it is not bad' (cited in Butler 2019). Housing professionals see this 'solution' as the clearest sign that things have gone badly wrong. The units are very small, with little or no space for children to play and very restricted storage, and, given their metal structure and inadequate insulation, tenants report that they become unbearably hot in the summer months. And even though they are designed to be merely a temporary solution, it is not unusual for residents to spend six months and sometimes more than a year in the same unit.

Being homeless and relying on emergency accommodation may be viewed as a definition of a family living in poverty. But does it mean you are 'poor'? Jennie, a single parent living in a different type of temporary accommodation in North London with three disabled children, thinks she is poor: 'I mean, in a way, yes, I am poor. Poor – it means you can't afford anything. You can't afford what you need.' This idea that being poor means not being able to afford the things you need – not things you want – for a decent life is commonly held, though Jennie's youngest son, eleven-year-old Michael, does not see things that way. He says, 'We're not actually poor like in a living on the streets way. We ain't got the perfect clothes in the world, clothes that other people's kids have, but we're happy with what we've got as long as we can live.' Jennie receives state benefits, most of which goes on food, school clothes, fuel and travel, and their rent is paid by housing benefit. They have a television, a washing machine and a fridge, but they don't go out much and have never been on holiday together. Do you think they are poor? Are they living in poverty?

Jennie's situation is recounted in Lansley and Mack's (2015) survey of poverty in Britain in the twenty-first century. The study finds that poverty in the UK is not in decline but is actually increasing. Yet if Jennie really is poor, or can be said to be living in poverty, it is not the same type of poverty that exists in some countries in the Global South, where even the basic necessities for life, such as shelter, clean water, education and easily accessible healthcare, are just not available for many families. What we think of as poverty differs according to the accepted norms of life for the majority of people in their own national context.

Many people who encounter someone like Jennie make assumptions about her life. They might see her poverty as a result of her upbringing. Others might label her as 'workshy' or blame her for not working hard enough, perhaps suggesting that living on state benefits is too comfortable. Amid rising levels of such media and political commentary, a study of poverty and insecurity by Shildrick et al. (2012: 2–3) concluded: 'Our overall findings are that while participants moved in and out of unemployment and low-paid jobs stretching over years, most expressed enduring commitment to work.'

In sociology, we can rarely, if ever, be satisfied with individualistic explanations. Poverty is not just a 'personal trouble' but a persistent 'public issue', and it is the sociologist's task to develop a broader view of society that can make sense of the experiences of many people who are in a similar position to Jennie. In this chapter, we examine the idea and experience of poverty more closely and consider the broader concept of social exclusion which rose to prominence in the 1990s. In the final section, we look at how and why welfare states came into being and recent attempts to reform them.

Readers should note that chapters 11 and 6 are quite closely related. This chapter focuses primarily on poverty, exclusion and welfare in the industrialized countries, using the UK as a case study throughout, with comparisons in Europe. However, chapter 6, 'Global Inequality', widens the focus to take in issues of poverty and inequality in a global context, with a specific focus on the Global South.

Poverty

Defining poverty

While everyone seems intuitively to understand what poverty is, arriving at an agreed definition for social scientific use has proved difficult. In 2000, the World Bank (2000: 15) defined poverty as 'pronounced deprivation in well-being'. This pithy statement is a start, but it raises the question of what constitutes well-being. Is it the ability to maintain good health, to have a good education or to have sufficient food? Is it all of those things? In the relatively wealthy societies, enjoying these things means having the resources to do so and is usually measured by income, though other criteria are sometimes used. Conversely, being 'in poverty' or 'pronounced deprivation' means not having enough income to gain such resources.

Sociologists usually distinguish two types of poverty: absolute poverty (often called 'extreme' poverty) and relative poverty. Absolute poverty is grounded in the idea of subsistence – the basic conditions that must be met in order to sustain a physically healthy existence. People who lack these fundamental requirements – such as sufficient food, shelter and clothing – are said to live in absolute poverty. It is held that standards of human subsistence are more or less the same for all people of equivalent age and physique, so any individual, anywhere in the world, can be said to live in absolute poverty if this universal standard is not met. On this definition, absolute poverty is rare in the industrialized countries.

Yet large numbers of people in these countries are still at risk of relative poverty. In purely economic terms, the general criteria for relative poverty is that people live in a household whose disposable income is less than 60 per cent of the national median in that country. On this measure, some 112.8 million people in the then twenty-eight countries of the European Union were at risk of 'poverty or social exclusion' in 2017 (social exclusion is discussed later in the chapter). That was 22.4 per cent of the EU population (Eurostat 2019a). Of course, poverty rates differ quite widely across the EU-28, as figure 11.1 shows.

However, in terms of economic inequality *within* countries, the share of national revenue which goes to the bottom fifth of the population is often not so different, despite the very different economic positions of nation-states. For instance, in Rwanda, 5.3 per cent of national revenue went to the poorest fifth of the population in 2007, and in the USA the figure was 5.4 per cent (IBRD/World Bank 2007). As [chapter 6](#), 'Global Inequality', shows, chronic inequality still exists within the Global North in spite of the elimination of the extreme aspects of poverty. Poverty and inequality are related, but they are not the same.

Many scholars do not accept that it is possible to identify a universal standard of absolute poverty. It is more appropriate, they argue, to use the concept of relative poverty, which links deprivation to the overall standard of living in a particular society. Human needs are *not* everywhere identical but differ both within and across societies. Things seen as essential in one society might be regarded as luxuries in another. In most industrialized societies, running water, flush toilets and the regular consumption of fruit and vegetables are regarded as basic necessities, so people without them can be said to live in relative poverty. In many countries in the Global South, these elements are not standard among the majority of the population, and it would not make sense to measure poverty according to their presence or absence. The accepted definition of *absolute* poverty has also changed over time according to the existing knowledge that is available in particular periods (Howard et al. 2001). In short, even the definition of absolute poverty proves to be relative to time and place, which undermines the concept's proposed universality.
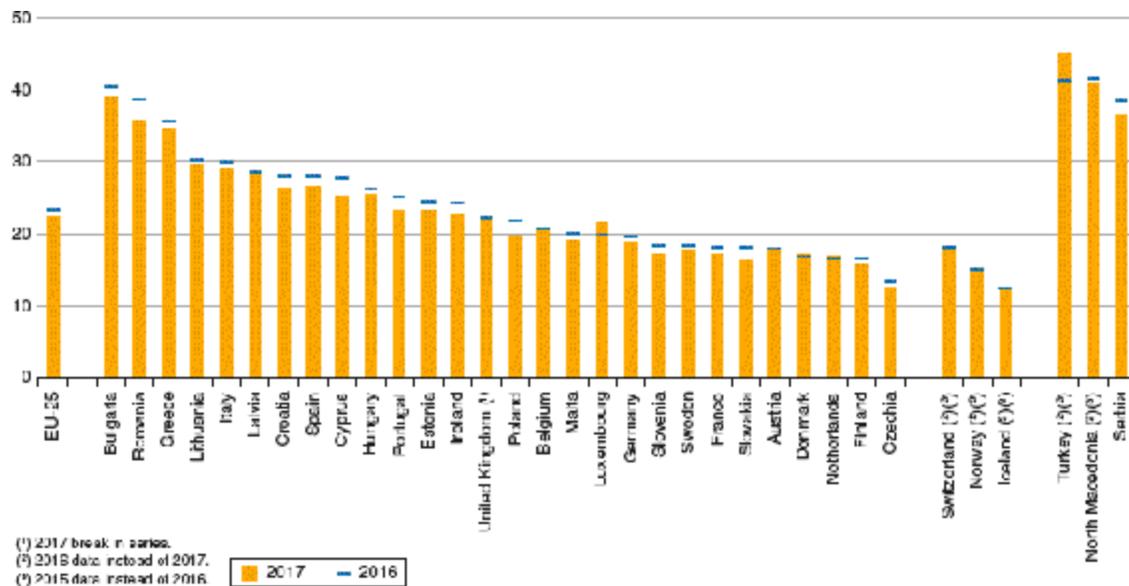
Figure 11.1 EU at risk of poverty rates, 2016–17

Source: Eurostat (2019a).

> For much more on issues of inequality and poverty in the Global South, see chapter 6, 'Global Inequality'.

The concept of relative poverty presents its own complexities. As societies develop, so do the criteria of relative poverty, and, as societies become more affluent, criteria of relative poverty are gradually adjusted upwards. In the early twentieth century, refrigerators, televisions, central heating and telephones were all considered luxury goods, but in the industrialized countries today they are seen as necessities. Families which do not have or cannot afford such items may be considered to be in relative poverty because they are not able to live the kind of lifestyle enjoyed by the majority in their society. Of course, their parents and grandparents may not have had such things, but they would not have been considered to be in poverty at that time.

Some people even question whether we can really say that 'poverty' exists at all in the developed economies, where a variety of consumer

goods sit in practically every home. To illustrate these debates, the next section examines some of the official methods of measuring poverty in the UK and sociological attempts to improve on these.

How much poverty?

Official measurements of poverty

Until around 1999, successive British governments, unlike most other European countries, did not recognize an official 'poverty line', preferring instead to use a range of separate indicators. This meant that researchers had to rely on statistical indicators, such as eligibility for certain state benefits, to gauge poverty levels. Since the 1980s most EU states have defined poverty as living in a household with an income on or below 60 per cent of the national median household income, usually after direct taxes but excluding housing costs. This is often abbreviated to HBAI (Households Below Average Income). The median income is the income level where exactly half of the population are above it and the other half below it.

This measure was adopted by the UK Labour government from 1999 in its attempt to halve child poverty within a decade and eliminate it within twenty years (Lansley and Mack 2015). The consistent use of the HBAI as a measure of relative poverty allows poverty levels to be tracked over time. For instance, the number of people living in poverty in the UK increased dramatically throughout the 1980s, peaking in 1991–2, before falling back from the mid-1990s onwards. In 2009–10, the Department for Work and Pensions reported that 10.4 million people – 17 per cent of the population – were living in poverty according to this measure (DWP 2011: 11). That percentage has been remarkably stable since 1994–5: it rose briefly to around 19 per cent following the 2008 financial crash but fell back to 16 per cent by 2013 (ONS 2015a: 4).

The EU has adopted a similar but not identical measure, known as the 'at risk of poverty or social exclusion rate' (AROPE). This involves three measures: people at risk of income poverty, those in material deprivation, and those living in households with a very low 'work intensity' (Eurostat 2015a). The 'at risk of income poverty' measure

refers to individuals with an equivalized disposable income below 60 per cent of the national median income. Material deprivation refers to the inability to pay for goods such as a washing machine, TV or car and an enforced inability to pay rent or utility bills or to cover unexpected expenses. Low work intensity means that a household's members collectively work less than one-fifth of the time they could have done in a given year. In 2016–17 the EU countries had 53.5 million people in income poverty, 13.8 million in material deprivation and 11.9 million in households with very low work intensity. Another 26.5 million were in households experiencing two of these risks and 7.1 million in households with all three (Eurostat 2019a).

Combining poverty and social exclusion in this way allows for a broader comparison of cross-national disadvantage and inequality, but it also adds a layer of complexity to comparative statistical analyses. Clearly, given the differing and changing definitions of relative poverty, comparing poverty rates across time and countries, though not impossible, is fraught with difficulties. The picture is even more complex as other organizations use their own poverty indicators in addition to income poverty.

One independent UK think tank, the New Policy Institute (NPI), looks at fifty indicators of poverty and social exclusion across income, housing, employment (and unemployment), benefits and services. It defines poverty as a 'state where people are far below the norms of everyday life', effectively covering issues of both poverty and social exclusion (MacInnes et al. 2014: 6). The thirteenth NPI *Monitoring Poverty and Social Exclusion* report, in 2010, found that overall poverty levels in the UK in 2008–9 were unchanged from the previous year, but the number of people in households experiencing 'deep poverty' – less than 40 per cent of median incomes – had continued to rise and now stood at 5.8 million, or 44 per cent of all those in poverty. This was the highest proportion since 1979 (NPI 2010: 23).

The NPI's 2015 report (MacInnes et al. 2015) noted that half of all those in poverty live in families where someone is in paid work – known unsurprisingly as 'in-work poverty'. This finding shows that we must be careful not to perpetuate social stereotypes of poverty as linked only to state benefit claimants and unemployed people. As we shall see later in

the chapter, more recent research studies in this area demonstrate that people move into and out of poverty over the life course as their work and overall situation changes.

Who is poor? These children in a refugee camp …

Poverty and relative deprivation

Some researchers argue that official measures of the kind discussed above do not give us an accurate picture of poverty. Several important studies have been carried out which define poverty as a type of deprivation. One pioneer of this approach was Peter Townsend, whose

work from the late 1950s onwards increased public awareness of what 'living in poverty' actually means (see 'Classic studies' 11.1).

Building on Townsend's definition of poverty as deprivation, Mack and Lansley undertook two influential studies of relative poverty in the UK, the first in 1983 and a second in 1990 (published in 1985 and 1992 respectively). For a television programme, *Breadline Britain*, in 1983, they conducted an opinion poll to determine what people considered 'necessities' for an 'acceptable' standard of living. This generated a list of twenty-two basic necessities that more than 50 per cent of respondents considered important for a 'normal' life. By asking respondents what *they* thought to be necessities, Mack and Lansley avoided the criticism directed against Townsend's original survey – that his choice of items for the deprivation index was arbitrary. The 1983 survey estimated that around 7.5 million people in the UK lived in poverty – about 14 per cent of the population. Mack and Lansley repeated the exercise in 1990 and found a significant *growth* in poverty during the 1980s, with the number of people living in poverty at around 11 million.

... or these children from a dilapidated housing estate?

[Classic studies 11.1](#) Peter Townsend on poverty and deprivation

The research problem

Sociologists establish the extent of poverty in society by collating income and other statistics, but what is it like to experience poverty? How are low incomes juggled to make ends meet and what do people have to go without? Peter Townsend's studies concentrated on people's subjective experience and understanding of poverty, trying to ascertain exactly what poverty means in terms of deprivation – the lack of or denial of material benefits considered essential for a particular society. In his classic study *Poverty in the United Kingdom* (1979), Townsend examined the responses to more than 2,000 questionnaires filled in by households across the UK in the late 1960s. Respondents provided detailed information about their lifestyles, including living conditions, eating habits, leisure and civic activities, as well as their income.

Townsend's explanation

From the information collected, Townsend selected twelve items which were relevant across the sample population, rather than to particular social groups, then calculated the proportion of the population that were deprived of these items (see [table 11.1](#)). He gave each household a score on a deprivation index – the higher the score, the more deprived the household – then compared the position of households on the index to their total income, making allowances for factors such as the number of people in each household, whether the adults were working, the ages of the children, and whether any members of the house were disabled.

Table 11.1 Townsend's deprivation index (1979)

Source: Townsend (1979: 250).

Characteristics	*Percentage of the population*
1 Has not had a holiday away from home in the past twelve months.	53.6
2 Adults only. Has not had a relative or a friend to the home for a meal or snack in the past four weeks.	33.4
3 Adults only. Has not been out in the past four weeks to a relative or friend for a meal or snack.	45.1
4 Children only (under fifteen). Has not had a friend to play or to tea in the past four weeks.	36.3
5 Children only. Did not have a party on last birthday.	56.6
6 Has not had an afternoon or evening out for entertainment in the past two weeks.	47.0
7 Does not have fresh meat (including meals out) as many as four days a week.	19.3
8 Has gone through one or more days in the past fortnight without a cooked meal.	7.0
9 Has not had a cooked breakfast most days of the week.	67.3
10 Household does not have a refrigerator.	45.1
11 Household does not usually have a Sunday joint (three in four times).	25.9
12 Household does not have sole use of four amenities (flush WC; sink or washbasin and cold water tap; fixed bath or shower and gas/electric cooker).	21.4

Townsend concluded that his survey revealed a threshold for levels of income below which social deprivation rose rapidly. It was these households which he described as suffering from poverty, and he calculated that they formed 22.9 per cent of the population – far higher than previous figures had suggested. Townsend's study showed that, as household income falls, so families withdraw from taking part in quite ordinary activities: in short, they become 'socially excluded'.

Critical points

Although Townsend's approach was very influential, several critics, including David Piachaud (1987), argued that the items selected by Townsend for his deprivation index have an arbitrary quality. That is, it is unclear exactly how they relate to 'poverty' or on what basis they were selected. Some of the items seem to have more to do with social or cultural decisions than poverty and deprivation. If someone chooses not to eat meat or to have cooked breakfasts, or decides not to socialize regularly or holiday away from home, it is not immediately obvious that the person is suffering from poverty.

Contemporary significance

The cultural critique is an important one, but, over the long term, Townsend's approach to the study of poverty and deprivation has retained its significance. Indeed, it has formed the basis for numerous sociological studies, which have tried to avoid the cultural criticism levelled against Townsend's original study. The attempt to construct a deprivation index based on specific factors remains valuable in our efforts fully to understand how poverty and deprivation are inextricably linked. Townsend's studies were also instrumental in moving contemporary debates on poverty towards an appreciation of the underlying processes of social exclusion, which deny full citizenship to people living in poverty.

In 2000, David Gordon and colleagues carried out a similar survey, the Millennium Survey of Poverty and Social Exclusion (known as the PSE survey). The research team used a questionnaire to determine what people considered 'necessities' for an acceptable standard of life in the

UK. Based on the responses, they created a list of thirty-five items which more than 50 per cent of respondents considered necessities (see table 11.2). The team then set a threshold for deprivation, based on an enforced lack of *two or more* necessities, combined with a low income.

The PSE survey found that 28 per cent of the sample lacked two or more necessities, although this included 2 per cent whose incomes were high enough to suggest they had now risen out of poverty, leaving 26 per cent of the survey population classified as being in relative poverty. Because the researchers adopted a similar method to that used by Mack and Lansley, they were able to use their data to compare how the UK poverty level had changed over time. The number of households lacking three or more socially perceived necessities (set as the poverty threshold in Mack and Lansley's studies) had increased substantially, from 14 per cent in 1983 to 21 per cent by 1990, and to 24 per cent by 1999. Thus, although the British population as a whole had become wealthier since the early 1980s, by 2000 there had also been a dramatic rise in poverty.

A 2006 study re-analysed some of the data from Gordon's PSE survey (Palmer et al. 2006). Combining similar items from the thirty-five 'essential items' scale, they found that the bulk of these were directly 'money-related' – that is, the respondents simply did not have a high enough income to afford them (figure 11.2). Drawing on a Family Resources Survey from 2004–5, the team was then able to compare low-income households with those on average incomes in relation to ten selected essential items (see figure 11.3). Again, significant proportions of low-income households reported they could not afford these items. Almost 60 per cent could not make savings of £10 or more per month, over 50 per cent could not afford an annual holiday, and one-third could not afford to insure their household contents.

Palmer's team point out that a significant minority of households on *average* incomes reported that they could not afford these items either. The report is therefore critical of the use of subjectively defined measures, which are of limited value in providing a reliable and valid measure of 'real' poverty. For instance, if almost one-third of people on average incomes cannot afford to make 'savings of £10 per month or

more' and one-quarter cannot afford 'holidays away from home one week a year', does that mean they also 'live in poverty'? What is needed in addition is qualitative information about exactly *why* households cannot afford such items. This would enable us to assess the extent to which the lack of each item is an example of 'enforced poverty' caused by socio-economic circumstances or the result of personal choice, where other things are prioritized.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> If the measurement of 'relative poverty' changes as societies develop, does this suggest that 'the poor will always be with us'? Explain why this is a misreading of the concept and measurement used to identify those in relative poverty.

The risk of becoming poor

Many individuals move into and out of poverty throughout their lives, which may create the impression that poverty is too fluid to be socially patterned. However, what we also know is that the *risk* of being in poverty is higher for some social groups than for others. For example, children, women, some minority ethnic groups and older people are among the highest-risk groups. In particular, those who are disadvantaged or discriminated against in other aspects of life have an increased chance of being poor. Recent migrants from outside the European Union, for example, have higher poverty rates than longstanding European populations. Not only are migrants more at risk of poverty, they also face a higher risk of being exploited at work (Lelkes 2007). And, while this section focuses primarily on the UK, these patterns are repeated to varying degrees across the Global North.

Table 11.2 Perception of adult necessities and how many people lack them (percentage of adult population)

Source: Gordon et al. (2000: 14).

	Items considered		Items that respondents	
	necessary	not necessary	don't have, don't want	don't have, can't afford
Beds and bedding for everyone	95	4	0.2	1
Heating to warm living areas of the home	94	5	0.4	1
Damp-free home	93	6	3	6
Visiting friends or family in hospital	92	7	8	8
Two meals a day	91	9	3	1
Medicines prescribed by doctor	90	9	5	1
Refrigerator	89	11	1	0.1
Fresh fruit and vegetables daily	86	13	7	4
Warm, waterproof coat	85	14	2	4
Replace or repair broken electrical goods	85	14	6	12
Visits to friends or family	84	15	3	2
Celebrations on special occasions such as Christmas	83	16	2	2
Money to keep home in a decent state of decoration	82	17	2	14
Visits to school, e.g. sports day	81	17	33	2
Attending weddings, funerals	80	19	3	3
Meat, fish or vegetarian equivalent every other day	79	19	4	8
Insurance of contents of dwelling	79	20	5	8
Hobby or leisure activity	78	20	12	7
Washing machine	76	22	3	1
Collect children from school	75	23	36	2
Telephone	71	28	1	1
Appropriate clothes for job interviews	69	28	13	4
Deep freezer/fridge freezer	68	30	3	2
Carpets in living rooms and bedrooms	67	31	2	3
Regular savings (of £10 per month) for rainy days or retirement	66	32	7	25
Two pairs of all-weather shoes	64	34	4	5
Friends or family round for a meal	64	34	10	6
A small amount of money to spend on self weekly, not on family	59	39	3	13
Television	56	43	1	1
Roast joint/vegetarian equivalent once a week	56	41	11	3
Presents for friends/family once a year	56	42	1	4
A holiday away from home once a year	55	43	14	18
Replace worn-out furniture	54	43	6	12
Dictionary	53	44	6	5
An outfit for social occasions	51	46	4	4
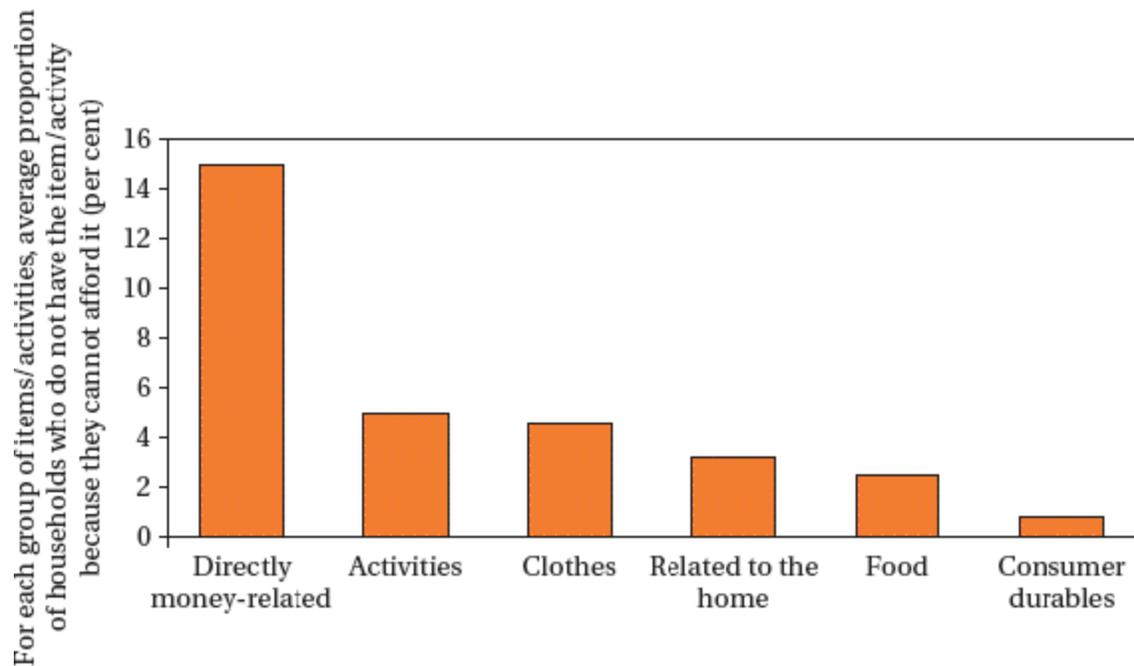
Figure 11.2 Essential items most commonly lacking, by category

Source: Palmer et al. (2006: 35).
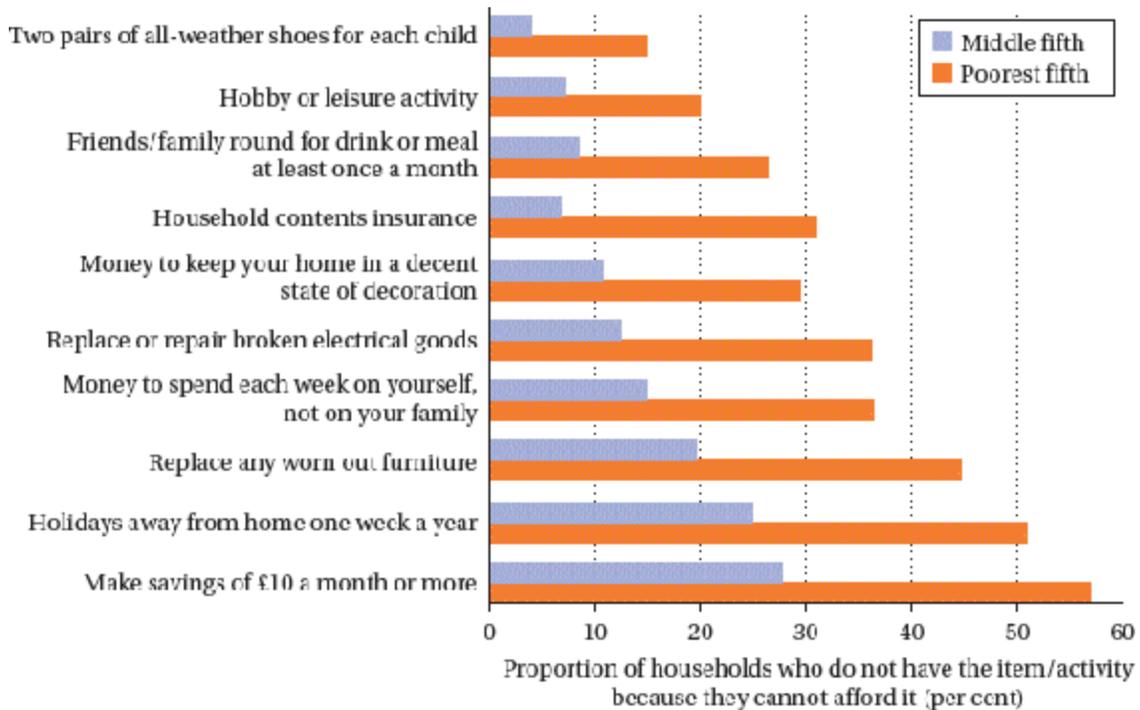
Figure 11.3 Percentage of UK households which cannot afford selected 'essential items', by average and low-income household

Source: DWP (2005).

> Poverty and inequality in the Global South are covered in [chapter 6](#), 'Global Inequality'.

Children

Children have long been identified as a social category that is at high risk of poverty, and Platt (2013: 328) maintains that 'Children not only face higher risks of poverty but they are particularly vulnerable to its negative consequences, particularly when these persist over time. Effects are both long-term (into adulthood) and have been shown to emerge early in life.' For example, children who live in poverty tend to have worse health than those who do not. They are also more likely to be of low birth weight, to be injured or killed in road accidents (because they are more likely to be pedestrians and less likely to have access to a safe play area or garden), to suffer abuse and self-harm, and to attempt suicide. Poorer children are less likely to do well at school and are far more likely to become poor as adults (Lister 2020). Just how big is the problem of child poverty in a wealthy country like the UK?

The proportion of *all people* in the UK living in households below average income (before housing costs) rose steadily between 1979 and 1991–2, reaching 22 per cent. However, after 1991–2, the trend was downwards, and by 2007–8 this figure had fallen to 18 per cent. The proportion of *children* living in poverty stood at 27 per cent in 1990–1, then fell to 21 per cent in 2004–5 (ONS 2010a: 71). The Labour government elected in 1997 set ambitious targets of reducing child poverty by 50 per cent between 1998 and 2010–11 and eliminating it 'within a generation', but even the former has not been achieved. In 2009–10, child poverty still stood at 19.7 per cent, 900,000 children short of the target.

Labour's 2010 Child Poverty Act set a legal requirement for the eradication of child poverty by 2020, and though the Conservative–

Liberal Democrat coalition government (2010–15) confirmed this as a policy goal, in practice the commitment was not actively pursued (Lansley and Mack 2015). The 2015 Conservative government then abolished the Child Poverty Act in 2016, replacing it with a simpler duty to report on levels of educational attainment, worklessness and addiction. However, the government did agree to publish regular statistics on levels of child poverty without any requirement to tackle this.

An analysis by the New Policy Institute (NPI) (Aldridge et al. 2015) suggested that poverty began to rise in 2013 and by 2015 had already increased by around 300,000, with 29 per cent of UK children living in poverty. In 2019 the Child Poverty Action Group reported that 30 per cent of UK children (4.1 million) were living in poverty by 2017–18 and that the number was still rising.

The laudable aim of eliminating child poverty by 2020 has been overtaken not only by changes in government but also by the 2008 financial crash, which formed the backdrop for the transformation of the political and economic policy debate on poverty alleviation. What we can conclude is that eliminating child poverty cannot be achieved by short-term economic and social policies but requires consistently applied measures over a long time period. Given the five-year electoral cycle of British politics, and in the absence of any basic political consensus on the 'real' level of child poverty, this seems highly unlikely at present.

Women

As we see at several points throughout this chapter, women are more likely to be poor than men. The PSE survey carried out by Gordon and his colleagues (2000) found that women comprised 58 per cent of all adults living in poverty. However, the causes of this are complex, as female poverty has often been masked behind studies which focused on 'male-headed households' (Ruspini 2000). This presents problems for sociologists when they try to make use of such studies.

One important element concerns the gendered division of labour both inside and outside the home. The burden of domestic labour and the

responsibility of caring for children and relatives still fall disproportionately on women, and this has an important effect on their ability to work outside the home. It means that they are far more likely than men to be in part-time paid employment and earn less as a result and more likely to be in lone-parent households.

The UK's Low Pay Commission (2009: 15) found that around two-thirds (64.3 per cent) of all jobs covered by the National Minimum Wage were held by women. Although more women have entered paid work in the UK than ever before, occupational segregation – what is considered 'a man's job' and 'women's work' – in the labour force remains entrenched. Women are disproportionately represented in less well-paid industries, which has a negative effect on income from private pensions later in life (Flaherty et al. 2004).

Minority ethnic groups

Higher rates of poverty exist in the UK for all black and minority ethnic groups than for the white majority population (Barnard and Turner 2011). Minority ethnic groups in the UK are also more likely to have poorly paid jobs, to struggle at school, to live in deprived areas and in poor quality housing, and to suffer health problems (Salway et al. 2007). The Child Poverty Action Group (2019) reported that 45 per cent of children from black and minority ethnic groups lived in poverty in 2017–18 compared with 26 per cent of children in white British households.

Poverty levels differ by ethnicity in the UK (and elsewhere) and have proved to be remarkably resistant to change. Before the 2008 financial crash, relative poverty levels (after housing costs (AHC)) were highest among Bangladeshi (67 per cent), Pakistani (58 per cent) and black African groups (47 per cent) and lowest among the white majority population (20 per cent), Indian (27 per cent) and other white groups (28 per cent) (Fisher and Nandi 2015: 25–8; see figure 11.4). After the crash, between 2009 and 2012, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis experienced more 'persistent poverty' (in at least two of three observed years) than other groups, while during the same period 72 per cent of the white majority were never observed to be in poverty.

It is worth noting that an AHC measure is useful, especially where housing costs vary widely across regions, such as in the UK. In London, for instance, the number of people living in poverty in 2013 almost doubles once housing costs are factored in (Tunstall et al. 2013: 34). Figure 11.4 includes measures of poverty both before (BHC) and after housing costs (AHC) to illustrate how levels of poverty can differ according to which measurement scheme is adopted.

Part of the reason for ethnic differences in income poverty levels can be found in the high unemployment and relatively low employment rates for some minority ethnic groups in the UK. In 2016–17, Bangladeshi people had the lowest employment rate, at 48.4 per cent, compared with 53.8 per cent for Pakistani groups (up by 10 per cent since 2010–11), 59.1 per cent for white British groups, and 62.7 per cent for black people (up by 8.7 per cent since 2010–11) (EHRC 2019: 47–50). Pakistani and Bangladeshi people were twice as likely to be in insecure forms of employment as the white British population. The EHRC report also found that Bangladeshi and Pakistani groups had the highest unemployment rates, at 13.4 per cent and 10.2 per cent respectively.

There is also a high degree of labour market segregation. Pakistani groups are largely concentrated in the former heavy manufacturing and textile industry areas, such as Yorkshire and Birmingham – industries that fell into recession in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Black Caribbean men are over-represented in lowerpaid manual occupations, particularly within the transport and communications industries, while Chinese and Bangladeshi people are particularly concentrated in the catering industry. Some of this occupational segregation has occurred because minority ethnic groups perceive certain industries or employers as 'white', though there is also evidence of racial discrimination during some recruitment processes (Wood et al. 2009).

Minority ethnic groups are among the poorest in Western societies, often, as this old poster by the Commission for Racial Equality suggests, because of racism, discrimination and insecure forms of work.

Over recent years, the concept of intersectionality has become more important in attempts to understand the differentiated experience not just of poverty but also of social life as a whole. Intersectionality refers to the way that the varied aspects of an individual's identity – such as class, ethnicity, gender, disability and location – interact to produce complex patterns of inequality, poverty and discrimination. As one report puts this;

> The experience of a middle class, third generation, Indian, Hindu woman with a degree, living in Milton Keynes may have little in common with a second generation, Indian, Muslim woman, with a level three qualification, living in Bradford with a disabled husband and two children. (Barnard and Turner 2011: 4)

Analysing the ways in which the varied elements of individual identities intersect to produce widely differing outcomes in relation to poverty is likely to become more commonplace in sociological and policy studies. However, it is also important to remember that there are structured patterns of disadvantage involving minority ethnic groups in the UK and elsewhere that influence the life chances of individuals and the choices they are able to make to shape their futures.
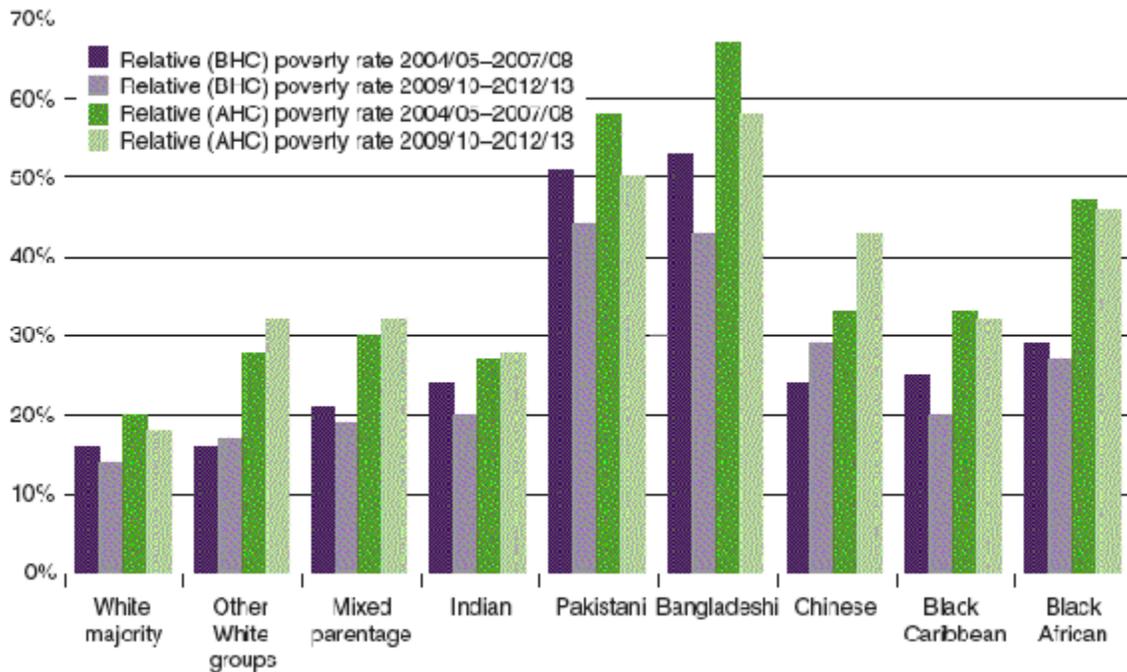
Figure 11.4 Relative poverty levels by ethnic group, pre- and post-2008 recession, UK (excluding Northern Ireland)

Note: AHC – after housing costs; BHC – before housing costs

Source: Fisher and Nandi (2015: 26).

Intersectionality is discussed in more detail in chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class'.

Older people

As life expectancy increases, so too does the number of older people in the population. Between 1961 and 2008, the proportion of people in the UK of pensionable age (sixty for women, sixty-five for men, across that time period) more than doubled, to 11.8 million, some 19 per cent of the total population (ONS 2010a: 3). Traditionally, many people who may have been quite well paid in their working lives experience a sharp reduction in income and status when they retire, with a large proportion falling into relative poverty. However, the evidence shows that this historic situation has changed significantly.

As figure 11.5 shows, using 2010–11 as the base year, on a relative poverty measure (taking inflation into account), the extent of pensioner poverty has fallen sharply, while on a simple annual relative poverty measure the downward trend until 2017–18 remains clear (figure 11.6). Note that 'absolute low income' is the authors' term for people in households with below 60 per cent of median income in 2010–11, uprated for inflation. It does not mean 'absolute poverty'. 'Relative low income' means households with 60 per cent of median income in that particular year.
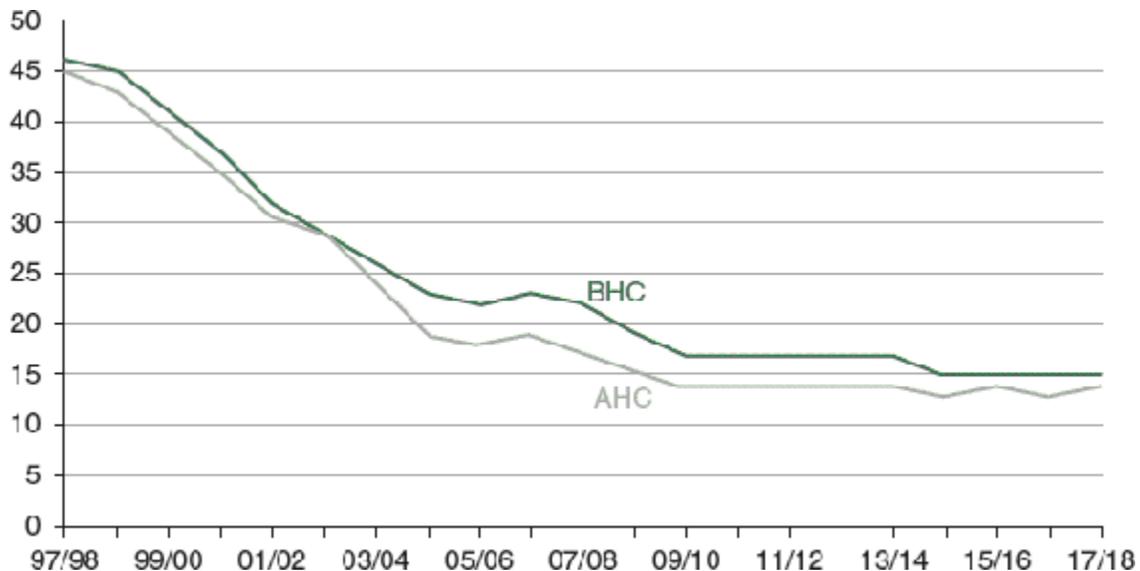
Figure 11.5 Percentage of pensioners in 'absolute low income', before and after housing costs, 1997–8 to 2017–18

Note: 1997–2002 figures are for Great Britain only.

Source: Francis-Devine et al. (2019: 13).
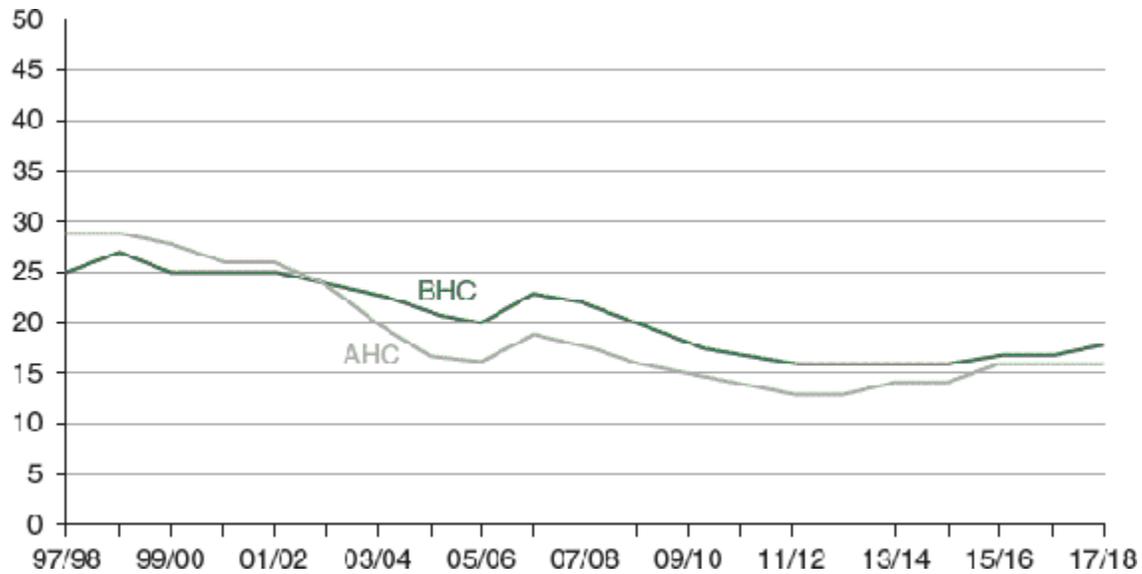
Figure 11.6 Percentage of pensioners in 'relative low income', before and after housing costs, 1997–8 to 2017–18

Note: 1997–2002 figures are for Great Britain only.

Source: Francis-Devine et al. (2019: 13).

Global life expectancy is discussed in more detail in chapter 14, 'The Life Course'.

Based on the HBAI (after housing costs) measure, the proportion of pensioners living in poverty decreased from over 40 per cent in 1990 to 15.6 per cent (1.8 million people) in 2009–10 (IFS 2011: 55), then rose slightly, to 16 per cent, in 2017–18 (2 million people) (Francis-Devine et al. 2019: 13). Between 1996–7 and 2009–10, pensioner poverty declined particularly rapidly, by 46 per cent over the period. The main reason for this steady improvement seems to be increases in benefit entitlement when inflation was relatively low for an extended period.

Fewer pensioners today seem to be trapped in poverty than in the past. Is it time to redistribute wealth from the old towards the young? How might this be attempted through taxation, property taxes and state benefits without pushing older people down into poverty?

The number of pensioners on low income does tend to increase with age, though not for all groups. Those with additional private pension provision are less likely to experience poverty, and there is a clear gender dimension to this. In 2004 only 30 per cent of women had an additional private pension, compared with more than 70 per cent of men (Wicks 2004). In recent decades, older women and those from ethnic minorities are more likely to experience poverty than other pensioner groups, which points to the need to be sensitive to social divisions and issues of intersectionality in the analysis of poverty and its alleviation.

Explaining poverty

Explanations of poverty can be grouped under two broad headings: theories that see individuals as responsible for their own poor situation and theories that view poverty as produced and reproduced by structural forces in society. These competing approaches are sometimes described as 'blame the victim' and 'blame the system' theories, respectively. We will briefly examine each in turn.

There is a long history of social attitudes that hold the poor responsible for their own disadvantaged position. Early efforts to address the effects of poverty, such as nineteenth-century workhouses, were grounded in a belief that poverty was the result of individual inadequacy or pathology. The poor were unable to succeed in society because of a lack of skills, moral or physical weakness, absence of motivation or below-average ability. Those who deserved to succeed did so; others less capable were doomed to fail. The existence of 'winners' and 'losers' was regarded as just a fact of life.

Accounts that explain poverty as primarily an individual failing lost ground during the mid-twentieth century, but by the 1970s and 1980s they enjoyed a renaissance. One influential version of this thesis was put forward by the American sociologist Charles Murray. Murray (1984) argued that there was an emerging underclass who did not take personal responsibility for their own poverty. This group formed part of a dependency culture of people who rely on welfare provision rather than entering the labour market. Murray contended that the growth of the welfare state created this subculture, which undermines personal ambition and people's capacity for self-help. In short, welfare, which was meant to provide a safety net, has eroded people's incentive to work, though Murray exempts those who are poor through 'no fault of their own', such as widows or disabled people.

Murray's work is examined in more detail in chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class'.

Murray's views resonated in many developed economies, especially the UK. Yet his ideas do not reflect the reality of poverty. As we have seen, the oldest and youngest members of society have often been the poorest, and they are either not in a position to work or are legally prevented from doing so. Many others in receipt of welfare benefits are actually in work but do not earn enough to take them over the poverty threshold. There is no convincing evidence linking poverty to an underclass of workshy people. Nonetheless, in the UK and the USA at least, the idea of an underclass did take root. In a speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2011, the government's work and pensions secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, again returned to the 1980s language of the 'underclass' when discussing the perpetrators of that summer's English riots.

The second perspective emphasizes larger social processes which produce conditions of poverty that are difficult for individuals to

overcome. Structural forces within society, such as social class position, gender, ethnic group or occupational position, shape the way in which resources are distributed. On this view, the apparent lack of ambition among the poor, which is often taken for a 'dependency culture', is in fact one *consequence* of people's constrained situation, not the *cause* of it.

An early exponent of this argument was R. H. Tawney (1964 [1931]), who saw poverty as an aspect of social inequality. For Tawney, social inequality led to extremes of both wealth and poverty, and both were dehumanizing. Extreme poverty limited life to mere subsistence, while extreme wealth led to a pampering of the rich. Both were reprehensible, but the key to tackling poverty was to reduce structural social inequality, not simply to blame individuals for their situation (Hickson 2004). Reducing poverty is not simply a matter of changing individual outlooks; it requires policy measures aimed at distributing income and resources more equally throughout society.

Will Hutton (1995) argued that processes of economic restructuring during the 1970s and 1980s created new social divisions between the *disadvantaged* (out of work but seeking employment), the *marginalized insecure* (in work but on fixed or short-term contracts with low income) and the *privileged* (in more secure full-time employment or self-employed with higher incomes). Hutton concluded that levels of poverty cannot be explained by individual motivation or personal attitudes. Instead, they have to be seen as intimately connected to structural, socio-economic shifts in society. As capitalist firms look to keep production costs down, manufacturing has moved to other parts of the globe where labour is cheaper and trade unions are weaker. As a new global division of labour takes shape, older working patterns are also transformed and secure work is replaced by more precarious forms.

Standing (2011) argues that the 2008 financial crisis drew attention to the recent emergence of a precariat, a global 'class-in-the-making', which lies outside of the conventional social class schemes of sociology. This term is a combination of *proletariat* – Marx's industrial working class – and *precarious*, arising from the increasingly insecure situation in which many groups of workers find themselves under conditions of

'flexible working', the gig economy, neo-liberal economics and globalization. Standing sees the precariat as making up around 25 per cent of the adult population of many countries that lack several or all of the main aspects of security afforded by citizenship in the industrial economies: adequate labour market opportunities, employment protections (including health and safety and regulations and protection against arbitrary dismissal), job security (as well as opportunities for advancement), opportunities to gain skills, income security and trade union representation.

While the industrial working classes fought for and still enjoy the many benefits of these opportunities and protections, those working on casual, short-term or zero-hours contracts, who are in and out of employment, unemployed or underemployed, are denied the security and stability that they bring. Yet the precariat is not a homogeneous or unified class. Standing (2011: 13–14) notes that:

> The teenager who flits in and out of the internet café while surviving on fleeting jobs is not the same as the migrant who uses his wits to survive, networking feverishly while worrying about the police. Neither is similar to the single mother fretting where the money for next week's food bill is coming from or the man in his 60s who takes casual jobs to help pay medical bills. But they all share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure).
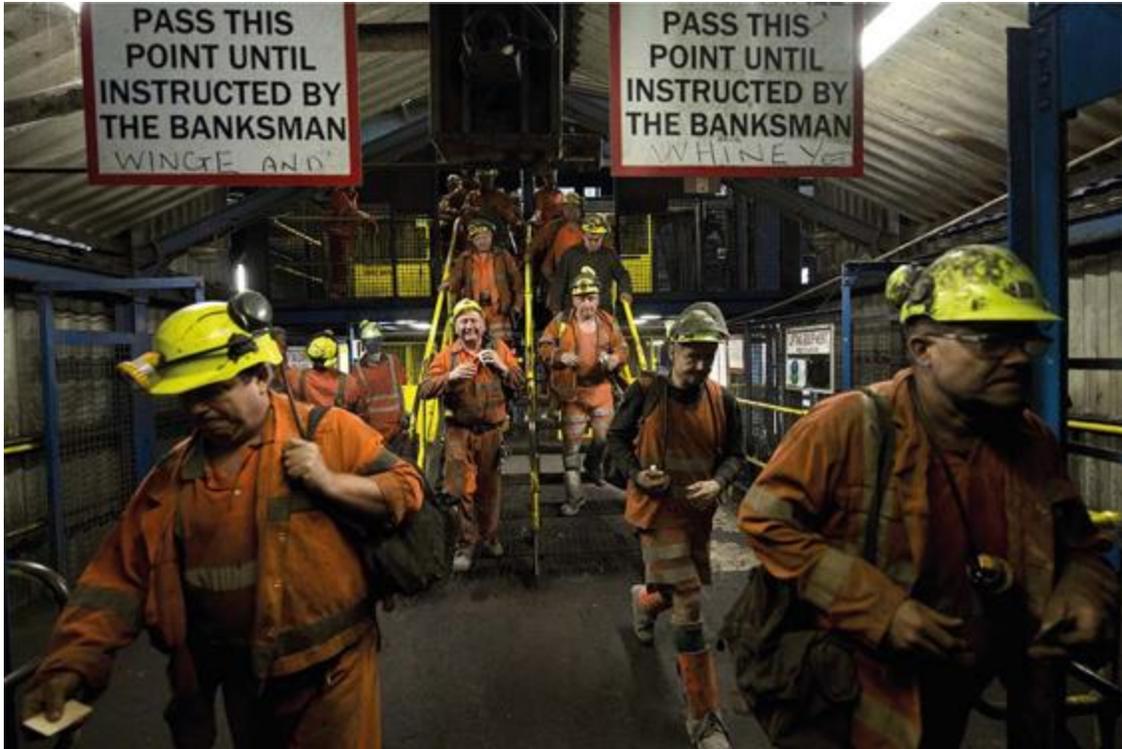
Miners leaving Kellingley Colliery in North Yorkshire, the last of the UK's deep coal mines, which closed in 2015. The decline of manufacturing jobs in the 1970s and 1980s eliminated many forms of traditionally male-dominated work. As a result, the urban economy was restructured and poverty levels increased.

Like Hutton, Standing adopts an economic restructuring explanation for the rise and growth of the precariat. Globalization processes since the early 1970s brought newly industrializing countries with relatively low labour costs into the global market, intensifying competitive pressures and leading to the movement to introduce more flexible labour market practices. The latter required sources of collective solidarity – such as trade unions – to be more tightly regulated and controlled, and governments (led by those with a neo-liberal economic agenda such as the USA and the UK) introduced a raft of new legislation to achieve this. As China, India, Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia and other countries have been drawn into the global economic system, firms have built or moved their production facilities into these countries and the global labour supply has grown enormously. One crucial result has been a serious weakening of workers' bargaining position in the industrialized countries and the parallel growth of chronic insecurity.

The two broad perspectives at the start of this section – poverty as individual choice and poverty as structurally caused – represent both sides of the agency–structure debate in sociology. However, it is not necessary to take sides. As our discussion in chapter 3 argues, structure and agency are inevitably intertwined, and the sociologist's task is to explore the significance of each in specific research studies. The decisions and choices made by individuals always take place within social contexts that are not entirely of their own making, and we need to understand those 'decisions in context' if we are to make sense of the interplay between human agency and social structure in the production of poverty.

See chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', for a discussion of the structure–agency debate in sociology

Poverty and social mobility

Most research into poverty in the past focused on people's entry into poverty and the shifting levels of poverty over time. Less attention has traditionally been paid to the 'life cycle' of poverty – people's trajectories into and out of (and often back into) poverty over time. Stephen Jenkins (2011) likens the distribution of income to a multi-storey apartment building. The poorest are in the basement and the richest in the penthouse, with the majority on the floors in between. Many 'snapshot' research studies tell us how many people are on each floor at a particular time, but they do not give us any information about movement between the floors.

Similarly, a widely held, common-sense view of poverty is that it is a constraining condition from which escape is unlikely. There is good evidence for this view. Persistent poverty is defined as experiencing relative low income in the current year and two of the previous three years, and the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS 2019k: 2) records

7.8 per cent of the population (4.7 million people) being in persistent poverty in 2017, around the same rate as in 2008. In the EU, the rate was higher in 2017, at 11.3 per cent. However, longitudinal research and panel studies (which track the same households or people over time) can provide useful information on whether individuals do in fact move out of the basement and, if so, whether they stay out or return. Of course, they can also tell us about movement the other way, from the penthouse down to the lower floors. The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) was just such a longitudinal study, which tracked 16,000 individuals across 9,000 households between 1991 and 2008.

In the decade of the 1990s, BHPS data showed that just over half of the individuals who were in the bottom fifth (quintile) by income in 1991 were in the same category in 1996. This does not necessarily mean they stayed there over the entire five-year period. Some may have done so, while others are likely to have risen out of the bottom quintile and returned to it again. As figure 11.7 shows, only around 18 per cent of those who spent some time in the poorest fifth between 2004 and 2007 were persistently in that quintile. Three-quarters made one or two moves in and out of the bottom fifth over the period. The BHPS survey shows that many families which move out of poverty have a higher risk of re-entering the category later. These findings have led to a new understanding of the quite fluid patterns into and out of poverty, which have also been found in other industrialized societies (Leisering and Leibfried 1999).

Drawing on figures from 2009 to 2012, Sissons et al. (2018) found that around one-quarter of employees in the accommodation and food services sector were in poverty, as were 15.6 per cent of those in administrative and support services and 14 per cent of those working in residential care. Conversely, in the financial and insurance, public administration and mining and quarrying sectors, the poverty rate was below 5 per cent. Although these sectoral differences can be partly explained by the typical number of hours worked, even on a comparison of full-time workers, almost 15 per cent of workers in accommodation and food services and 10.7 per cent in residential care remained in poverty. In these and other low-paid sectors of the

economy, moving to full-time hours of work would still not be enough to raise these households out of poverty (ibid.: 1085–7).
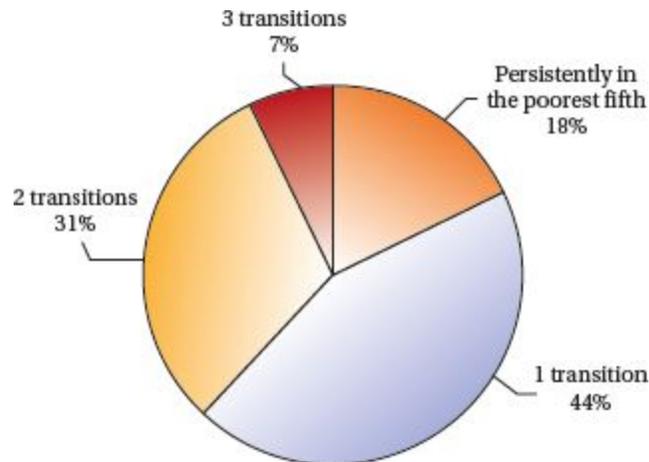
Figure 11.7 Number of moves into and out of the poorest fifth in the period 2004–7 among those with at least one year in the bottom fifth

Source: The Poverty Site (2011) – www.poverty.org.uk/08/index.shtml.

Jenkins (2011: 3) draws similar conclusions about the limited mobility of low-paid workers from his analysis of the UK BHPS data on the fluidity of poverty:

> there is substantial movement between floors each year, but most residents only make short distance moves. Few take the lift from the basement to the penthouse and few make the reverse trip. Fewer than one in ten people are long-term residents of the basement, stuck at the bottom. About onehalf of the basement residents in a given year move out the following year, but there is also a significant probability of returning there within the following one or two years. Getting a new job or higher pay is closely associated with transitions upwards from the bottom, and losing a job is closely associated with downward moves to the basement. Demographic events such as divorce, death of a partner, or the birth of a child are also important correlates of changes in fortunes, though more relevant for downward moves than upward ones.

Longitudinal research shows that poverty is not simply the result of social forces acting on passive individuals. Even those who are severely

disadvantaged can seize opportunities to improve their economic position, illustrating the power of human agency to bring about change. Nonetheless, moving out of poverty is clearly fraught with challenges and obstacles, and staying out of poverty over the long term seems to be difficult.

Although being poor does not inevitably mean becoming permanently mired in poverty, for millions of people the material deprivation associated with poverty remains remarkably persistent.

Social mobility is discussed more fully in [chapter 9](#), 'Stratification and Social Class', and [chapter 16](#), 'Education'.

Social exclusion

The concept of social exclusion originated in France and became embedded in the social policies of the European Union as well as other national governments (Pierson 2010: 8). It has been used by sociologists to explore emerging sources of inequality and continues to inform applied social research into multiple sources of disadvantage.

Social exclusion refers to ways in which individuals may become cut off from full participation in the wider society. For instance, people who live in a dilapidated housing estate, with poor schools and few employment opportunities in the area, may effectively be denied the opportunities for self-betterment available to most people in society. The concept of social exclusion also implies its opposite – *social inclusion* – and attempts to foster inclusion of marginalized groups have now become part of the agenda of modern politics, though *how* this is done differs across societies (Lister 2020).

Social exclusion raises the question of personal responsibility. After all, the word 'exclusion' implies a process in which some people are 'left out'. Individuals can find themselves excluded as a result of decisions taken by others. Banks might refuse to give a current account or credit card to people living in a certain area; insurance companies might reject a policy application because of an applicant's personal history or background; an employee made redundant later in life may be refused further jobs on the basis of their age. But social exclusion is not only the result of people being excluded; it can also result from people excluding themselves. Some people choose to drop out of education, to turn down a job offer and become economically inactive, or to abstain from voting in elections. In considering the phenomenon of social exclusion, we must again be conscious of the interaction between human agency and the role of social forces in shaping people's circumstances.

A useful way of thinking about social exclusion is to differentiate between 'weak' and 'strong' versions of the concept (Veit-Wilson 1998). Weak versions see the central issue simply as one of trying to ensure the inclusion of those who are currently socially excluded. Strong

versions also seek social inclusion, but, in addition, try to tackle some of the processes through which relatively powerful social groups 'can exercise their capacity to exclude' (Macrae et al. 2003: 90). This is a significant distinction, as the version adopted by governments will shape their policies towards social exclusion.

For example, in debates on rising levels of school exclusions for bad behaviour, a weak approach would focus on how individual children can be brought back into mainstream education, while a strong approach would also look at potential problems within the education system itself and the role of powerful groups within it which have the power to exclude. The problem with 'weak' versions is that they risk blaming those who are excluded for their own situation rather than focusing on structured forms of disadvantage.

Dimensions of social exclusion

Social exclusion focuses attention on a broad range of factors that prevent individuals or groups from having the same opportunities that are open to the majority of the population. Lister (2020) argues that this broad concept is a useful one for social scientists, provided that it is not seen as an alternative to poverty, which, she contends, remains central to any understanding of inequality and disadvantage. The 2000 PSE survey distinguished four dimensions of social exclusion: poverty or exclusion from *adequate income* or resources (which we discussed above), *labour market* exclusion, *service* exclusion and exclusion from *social relations* (Gordon et al. 2000).

For the individual, work is important not just because it provides an adequate income, but also because involvement in the labour market is an important arena of social interaction. Thus, labour market exclusion can lead to poverty, service exclusion and exclusion from social relations. Consequently, increasing the number of people in paid work has been seen by politicians as an important way to reduce social exclusion. However, to be in a 'jobless household' should not necessarily be associated with unemployment. The largest group of those who are not active in the labour market are, in fact, retired people. Other groups include those involved in domestic and caring activities, people who are

unable to work, perhaps because of disability, and students. Labour market inactivity cannot in itself be seen as a sign of social exclusion, but it can significantly increase the risk of wider social exclusion.

Another important aspect of social exclusion is lack of access to basic services, whether these are in the home (such as power and water supplies) or outside it (including access to transport, shops or financial services). Service exclusion can be individual, when someone cannot use a service because they cannot afford to do so or because they are not told it exists, or collective, when services are unavailable to whole communities. The latter occurs, for instance, when shops, banks and other services move out of disadvantaged housing estates, leaving communities without access to consumer goods and financial services enjoyed by the majority.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

11.1 Social exclusion at the top?

Not all cases of exclusion occur among those who are disadvantaged. In recent years, new dynamics of 'social exclusion at the top' have been emerging. By this, it is meant that a minority of individuals at the very top of society can 'opt out' of participation in mainstream institutions by merit of their affluence, influence and connections.

Elite social exclusion, such as provided by gated communities and neighbourhoods, physically separate the wealthy from the rest of society.

Such elite exclusion at the top of society can take a number of forms. The wealthy might retreat fully from the realm of public education and healthcare services, preferring to pay for private services and

attention. Affluent residential communities are increasingly closed off from the rest of society – the so-called gated communities located behind tall walls and security checkpoints. Tax payments and financial obligations can be drastically reduced through careful management and the help of private financial planners. Particularly in the United States, active political participation among the elite is often replaced by large donations to political candidates who are seen to represent their interests. In a number of ways, the very wealthy are able to escape from their social and financial responsibilities into a closed, private realm largely separate from the rest of society. Just as social exclusion at the 'bottom' undermines social solidarity and cohesion, so exclusion at the 'top' is detrimental to an integrated society.

THINKING CRITICALLY

What are the main differences between social exclusion at the 'bottom' and at the 'top' of society? Is it a misuse of the concept to use 'social exclusion' to describe the actions of small groups of rich people? How else might we characterize these activities?

There are numerous ways in which people can be excluded from wider social relations. Individuals may be unable to participate in common social activities, such as visiting friends and family, celebrating special occasions, having friends round for a meal or taking holidays. They can be isolated from friends and family or face a lack of practical and emotional support in times of need – someone to help around the house, to talk to when depressed or to get advice from about important life changes. People are excluded from social relations through a lack of *civic engagement*, including voting, getting involved in local or national politics, or being able to campaign on an issue they feel strongly about.

The multiple aspects of social exclusion can be seen most forcibly in the case of people seeking asylum in a country other than their own. Indeed, the very term 'asylum-seeker' has become stigmatized over recent years following sensationalist tabloid press reporting of the issue. But, as Pierson (2010: 7) points out, asylum-seekers face

'barriers to the jobs market, thin or non-existent support networks of their own, extreme difficulties in obtaining the safety net benefits of the welfare state, children facing poverty and marginalisation in the school system'. This example also illustrates that social exclusion is not 'natural' or inevitable and that there are things governments, individuals and communities can do to tackle the problems.

Homelessness

Homelessness is an extreme form of exclusion (Tipple and Speak 2009: 195). People lacking a permanent residence may be shut out of many everyday activities, such as going to work, having a bank account, entertaining friends and even getting letters in the post. Most homeless people are in some form of temporary accommodation, staying with friends and family for short periods, or sleeping in hostels, in nightshelters or in places where they have no legal right to stay, such as squats. A minority of people do choose to sleep on the streets, free from the constraints of property and possessions, but the majority of rough sleepers have been pushed into homelessness by domestic violence, unemployment, the loss of a partner, being evicted, on leaving the armed forces or being released from prison (Daly 2013).

Homelessness, including rough sleeping, is a complex and often extreme form of social exclusion.

Surveys have consistently shown that about a quarter of people who sleep rough have spent time in mental health institutions or have had a diagnosis of mental illness. Hence changes in healthcare policy are likely to have a disproportionate effect on the incidence of homelessness. However, most people who are homeless do not have mental ill health, nor are they alcoholics or regular consumers of illegal drugs. They are people who find themselves on the streets because they have experienced various personal crises.

Becoming homeless is rarely the outcome of a direct 'cause–effect' sequence. A number of misfortunes may occur in quick succession, resulting in a powerful downward spiral. A woman may get divorced, for instance, and at the same time lose not only her home but also her job. A young person may have trouble at home and take off for a big city without any means of support. Those who are most vulnerable to homelessness are people from lower-working-class backgrounds who have no specific job skills and very low incomes. But homelessness is

not simply a personal problem; rising levels of homelessness are the product of changes in government policy and much broader economic factors.

At the end of 2018, 62,000 families, including 124,000 children, were living in temporary accommodation in England, a rise of 80 per cent since 2010 (Children's Commissioner 2019: 5). Even these figures underestimate the scale of homelessness, as they do not account for families who are living with friends or family members, usually in cramped conditions, or the smaller number of children placed by social services rather than by council housing departments. In her report *Bleak Houses*, the Children's Commissioner for England estimated that some 92,000 children were in 'sofa-surfing' families in 2016–17, noting that: 'The children growing up in B&Bs, shipping containers and converted office blocks have a right to a decent home to grow up in. In this prosperous country of ours, it is a scandal that many thousands of children are growing up without one' (ibid.: 2–3).

Although temporary accommodation, such as guest houses, flats, converted office blocks, and (as our opening example shows) even shipping containers are meant to be a very short-term, emergency solution, many families spend months and even years before a more permanent placement becomes available. The 1980s policy of selling council housing stock through the right-to-buy scheme, a failure to build enough social housing, the high cost of private-sector rents, alongside welfare reform in the wake of the 2008 financial crash have led to rapidly rising levels of homelessness since 2010. The housing charity Shelter (2019) estimates that there were 1.5 million fewer social homes in England in 2019 than there were in 1980. Clearly, without a major social house-building programme, homelessness is likely to remain one of the largest sources of social exclusion and persistent poverty.

The welfare state

In the Global North and much of the South, poverty and social exclusion are alleviated to some degree by the welfare state. This means that the state plays a central role in the provision of social security and welfare, which it does by providing services and benefits to meet the basic needs of its citizens in healthcare, education, housing and minimum income levels. As we shall see, welfare states differ, both in the type and level of benefits they provide and in their underlying philosophies – that is, in what they are trying to achieve. Some provide a basic 'safety-net' while others are rooted in an ideal of 'cradle to the grave' provision. Still others, such as the USA, have minimal welfare provision which links benefits to people's commitment to work. These differing philosophies are reflected in welfare expenditure, which is relatively high in Denmark, Sweden and France and relatively low in South Korea, the USA and Japan.

The concept of environmental citizenship is discussed in chapter 5, 'The Environment'.

The face of welfare is different from country to country, and welfare states have changed over time. Having come through the 2008 financial crash, the world's societies have been forced by the Covid-19 pandemic to introduce emergency measures to slow down or stop the spread of the virus, which amounted to radically expanding social security provision, at least in the short term. The longer-term financial impact of dealing with the pandemic is not yet clear, but one consequence is very likely to be a renewed interest in what welfare states should and can afford to provide. At the outset, however, we need to understand how welfare states developed and how variations in state welfare models have been explained.

Theories of the welfare state

Most countries in the world today are, to varying degrees, welfare states, though this is something of a misnomer as much more than 'welfare' is involved. As Garland (2016: 3) puts it, 'Welfare states are not primarily about "welfare" and certainly not primarily about welfare for the poor. They are about social insurance, social rights, social provision, and the regulation of economic action – the chief beneficiaries of which are not the poor but the middle classes and those in employment.'

An important role of the welfare state involves managing the risks faced by people over the course of their lives: sickness, disability, job loss and old age. The services provided by the welfare state and the levels of spending on it vary from country to country. Some have highly developed systems and devote a large proportion of the national budget to them. In Sweden, for example, tax revenues in 2005 represented 51.1 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP), while in Belgium the figure was 45.4 per cent and in Austria it was 49.7 per cent. By comparison, other industrialized nations take far less in tax. In the UK, tax revenues in 2006 were 37.2 per cent of GDP, in Germany 34.7 per cent, and in the USA just 26.8 per cent (OECD 2006). Clearly this directly affects levels of social security provision.

Numerous theories have been advanced to explain the evolution of the welfare state. Marxists have seen welfare as necessary for sustaining a capitalist, market-based society by ensuring the reproduction of a healthy, well-educated workforce. Functionalists saw welfare systems contributing to the maintenance of social integration and solidarity under conditions of industrial development. While these general perspectives are useful points of orientation, the ideas of T. H. Marshall in Britain and of the Danish sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen have been particularly influential contributions to theories of the welfare state. Marshall's arguments are outlined in 'Classic studies' 11.2, and you should read this before moving on to later arguments on welfare and citizenship.

See [chapter 17](#), 'Work and Employment', for a discussion of work in the 'gig economy'.

Gøsta Esping-Andersen: three worlds of welfare

Gøsta Esping-Andersen's *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990) brings a comparative perspective to earlier theories of the welfare state. Esping-Andersen can be seen to have taken seriously the criticism levelled at Marshall's general evolutionary perspective – namely, that different national societies followed different paths towards citizenship rights and, accordingly, created different 'welfare regimes'. In this important work, Esping-Andersen compares Western welfare systems and presents a three-part typology of their regimes.

In constructing this typology, Esping-Andersen evaluated the level of decommodification – a term which refers to the extent to which workers are treated as a commodity. Labour movements and trade unions have long worked for the decommodification of labour and the full recognition of workers as citizens (Pintelon 2012). In a welfare system with high decommodification, welfare is provided publicly and is not linked to income or economic resources. In a commodified system, welfare services are treated like commodities to be sold on the market like any other goods or service. By comparing policies on pensions, unemployment and income support among countries, Esping-Andersen identified three types of welfare regime.

[Classic studies 11.2](#) T. H. Marshall and the evolution of citizenship in Britain

The research problem

You may have been described as a 'citizen' of a particular country, implying a certain 'belonging'. But when did the idea of national 'citizenship' emerge and how did it develop? What exactly *is* citizenship anyway and how is it related to the state's provision of welfare? One important theorist who tackled these questions was Thomas Humphrey Marshall (1893–1981), whose ideas have been very influential. Writing from the late 1940s, Marshall saw citizenship as emerging alongside industrialization as a fundamental feature of modern societies.

Marshall's explanation

Taking a historical approach, Marshall (1973) traced what he described as the 'evolution' of citizenship in Britain (specifically England) and identified three key stages, each one expanding the meaning of 'citizenship'. The eighteenth century was the time when *civil rights* were obtained. Among these were important personal liberties such as freedom of speech, thought and religion, the right to own property and the right to fair legal treatment. Building on these rights, in the nineteenth century, *political rights* were gained. These included the right to vote, to hold office and to participate in the political process. The third set of rights – *social rights* – were obtained in the twentieth century, notably the right of citizens to economic and social security through education, healthcare, housing, pensions and other services, all of which became enshrined in the welfare state.

The incorporation of social rights into the notion of citizenship meant that everyone was entitled to live a full and active life and had a right to a reasonable income, regardless of their position in society. In this respect, the rights associated with social citizenship greatly advanced the ideal of equality for all, and Marshall's account

is often described as an optimistic one, seeing a growing range of rights for all citizens.

Critical points

One immediate problem with Marshall's explanation is that it is based on a single case study – Britain – and critics have shown that his evolutionary approach cannot be applied to other national cases, such as Sweden, France or Germany (Turner 1990). Marshall's 'evolutionary' explanation is also not entirely clear. Is it really just a description of *how* citizenship actually developed in Britain, rather than a causal explanation of *why* it did so? Critics argue that Marshall tends to *assume* the progressive development of types of rights but does not explain the links between them or how, say, civil rights lead inevitably to political and then to social rights.

In more recent times, critics have asserted that the awareness of globalization makes Marshall's theory – which is based on the influence of the nation-state – rather outdated, as it seems to assume that citizenship develops from the internal dynamics of national societies. Today, sociologists are more sensitive to the relationships and influences between and across the world's societies. Finally – as we will see later in the chapter – Marshall's evolutionism is severely challenged by the attempts since the late 1970s to 'roll back' welfare provision in many societies, which does not appear to fit his historical thesis. Rather than witnessing a growing set of rights, citizens may find their right to state welfare support becomes ever more tightly restricted.

Contemporary significance

Marshall's views influenced debates about the nature of citizenship and, in recent years, informed political questions and academic research on social inclusion and exclusion. His central idea that rights and responsibilities are tightly intertwined with the notion of citizenship is enjoying renewed popularity in discussions about how to promote an 'active citizenship'. And, though his explanation is certainly too state-centred to be entirely satisfactory in a globalizing age, the idea of evolving rights and responsibilities continues to inform our understanding of what citizenship is. For

example, a relatively new type of citizenship now seems to be emerging – environmental or ecological citizenship – based on the rights and responsibilities of people towards the natural environment (M. J. Smith 1998; Dobson and Bell 2006). Hence, despite its flaws, there may yet be a little more life in Marshall's general approach.

1. *Social democratic* Social democratic welfare regimes are highly decommodified. Welfare services are subsidized by the state and available to all citizens (universal benefits). Most Scandinavian states such as Sweden and Norway have social democratic welfare regimes.

2. *Conservative-corporatist* In conservative-corporatist states, such as France and Germany, welfare services may be highly decommodified, but they are not necessarily universal. The amount of benefit to which a citizen is entitled depends on their position in society. This type of regime may be aimed not at eliminating inequalities but at maintaining social stability, strong families and loyalty to the state.

3. *Liberal* The United States provides the best example of a liberal welfare regime. Welfare is highly commodified and sold through the market. Means-tested benefits are available to the very needy but become highly stigmatized. This is because the majority of the population is expected to purchase its own welfare through the market.

The UK does not fall cleanly into any of these three 'ideal types'. Formerly, it was closer to a social democratic model, but a series of changes since the 1970s have brought it much closer to a liberal welfare regime with higher levels of commodification, which continues in the present period. The shift from one model to another makes the UK an interesting case study.

The UK welfare state

One of the main differences between welfare models is eligibility criteria for receipt of state benefits. A simple divide is that between

universality and means-testing. In systems with universal benefits, welfare is a right to be enjoyed equally by all, ensuring that citizens' basic welfare needs are met. Systems based on means-testing are designed to provide a basic, usually short-term safety net for people who find themselves in difficulty and need help to get by. In the UK, child benefit was previously paid to the parent or guardian of children under the age of sixteen regardless of income or savings. This universal benefit was effectively ended in 2013 as part of the coalition government's squeeze on public spending, limiting the full child benefit to households in which no individual member earns £50,000 or more per year.

The distinction between universal and means-tested benefits is expressed at a policy level in two contrasting approaches to welfare. Supporters of an *institutional* view argue that access to welfare services should be provided as a right for everyone. On the other hand, those taking a *residualist* view argue that welfare should be available only to people who truly need help and are unable to meet their own needs (Ginsberg and Miller-Cribbs 2005: 257).

Residualists advocate a 'safety-net welfare state' in which only those most in need – to be demonstrated through means-testing – should be in receipt of benefits. They also see the welfare state as expensive, ineffective and overly bureaucratic. On the other hand, institutionalists argue that tax levels should be relatively high because the welfare state needs to be properly funded. They say that the welfare state must be maintained and even expanded to counter the harsh, polarizing effects of the market, even though this means a higher tax burden. For institutionalists, it is the responsibility of any civilized state to provide for and protect its citizens.

This difference between institutional and residual models has been at the heart of UK debates on welfare reform since the mid-1970s. Today, in countries of the Global North, the future of the welfare state is under intense examination as never before, as governments deal with large national debts following the 2008 financial crisis, ageing populations and a growing demand for health services. Similarly, as globalization changes national societies, new patterns of migration, and shifts in the family, personal life and employment, the nature of welfare is changing

too. We will briefly trace the history of the welfare state in the UK and recent attempts to reform it.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> The residualist approach seems sensible; only those who need state help should get it. How would you convince a residualist that their position will lead to more poverty and a diminution of high-quality public services?

Founding the British welfare state

The welfare state in the UK was created during the twentieth century, though, as Fraser (2009: 2) points out, it was not created out of thin air: 'It was the end product of a very long historical process.' The roots of the UK welfare state stretch back to the Poor Laws of 1601 and the dissolution of the monasteries. The monasteries had provided for the poor, but, as this was closed down, the result was extreme poverty and an almost complete absence of care for the sick. With the development of industrial capitalism and the transition from an agricultural to an industrial society, traditional forms of informal support within families and communities also began to break down.

In order to maintain social order and reduce the inequalities brought about by capitalism, it was necessary to offer assistance to members of society who found themselves on the periphery of social life. This resulted in the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. Under this Act, workhouses were built, offering a lower standard of living than anything available outside. The idea was that the living conditions in the workhouses would make people do all they could to avoid poverty and stay out of the workhouse. Over time, as part of the process of nation-building, the state came to play a central role in administering to the needy. Legislation which established the national administration of education and public health in the late 1800s was a precursor to more extensive programmes which would come into being in the twentieth century.

The welfare state expanded further under the pre-First World War Liberal government, which introduced pensions and health and unemployment insurance. The years following the Second World War witnessed a further powerful drive for the reform and expansion of the welfare system. Rather than concentrating solely on the destitute or ill, the focus of welfare was broadened to encompass all members of society. The war had been an intense and traumatic experience for the entire nation which produced a strong sense of solidarity and the realization that misfortune and tragedy were not restricted to disadvantaged social groups.

This shift from a selective to a universalist vision of welfare was encapsulated in the Beveridge Report of 1942, often regarded as the blueprint for the modern UK welfare state. The report targeted 'five giants': Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. A series of legislative measures under the post-war Labour government began to translate this vision into concrete policy. Several main acts lay at the core of the new universalist welfare state. The wartime national government had already introduced the Education Act (1944), which tackled the lack of schooling, while the 1946 National Health Act was concerned with improving the quality of health among the population. 'Want' was addressed through the 1946 National Insurance Act, which set up a scheme to protect against loss of earnings as a result of unemployment, ill health, retirement or widowhood. The 1948 National Assistance Act provided means-tested support for those who were not covered under the National Insurance Act and finally abolished the old Poor Laws. Other legislation addressed the needs of families (1945 Family Allowances Act) and the demand for improved housing conditions (1946 New Towns Act).
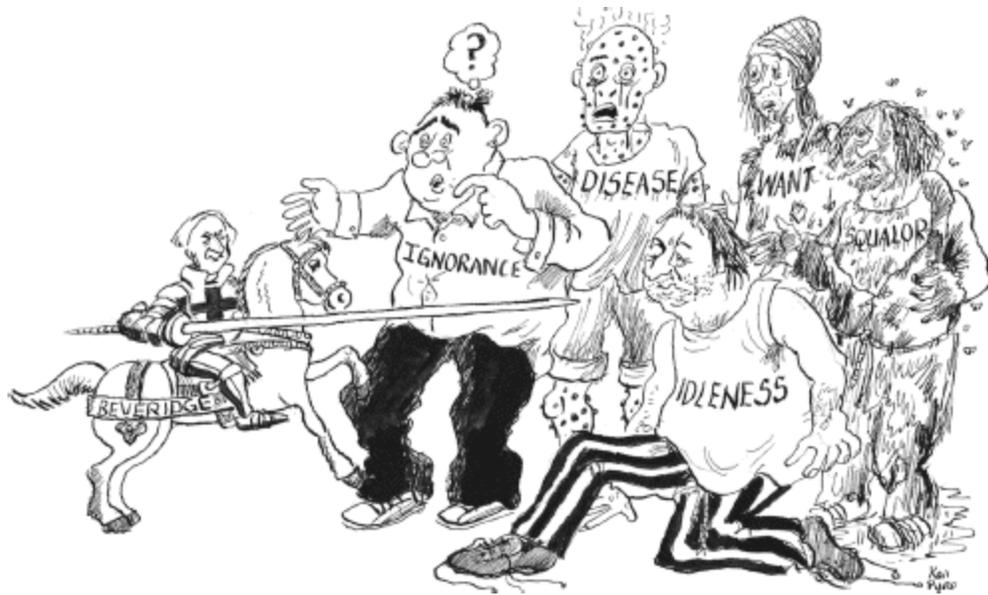
The 1942 Beveridge Report identified 'five giants' in society: Want, Disease, Ignorance, Squalor and Idleness. Beveridge's ideas are seen as foundation stones of the UK welfare state.

The welfare state in the UK therefore came into being under a set of specific conditions and alongside prevailing notions about the nature of society. The premises on which it was built were threefold. First, it equated work with paid labour and was grounded in a belief in the possibility of full employment. Welfare would meet the needs of those who were outside the market economy through unemployment or disability. Connected to this, the vision for the welfare state was predicated on a patriarchal conception of families – the male breadwinner supported the family financially, while women looked after domestic affairs in the home. Welfare programmes were designed around this traditional model of family responsibilities.

Second, the welfare state was seen as a source of national solidarity. It would integrate the nation by involving the entire population in a common set of services. Welfare was a way of strengthening the connection between the state and its citizens. Third, the welfare state was concerned with managing risks that occurred as a natural part of the life course. In this sense, welfare was viewed as a type of social insurance or social security that could be employed against the potential troubles of an unpredictable future. Unemployment, illness

and other misfortunes could thus be managed without families falling into destitution.

These principles underpinned the enormous expansion of the welfare state in the three decades after 1945. As the manufacturing economy grew, the welfare state represented a successful class 'bargain' – it met the needs of the working class but also those of the economic elite who depended on a healthy, well-educated workforce. But by the 1970s the political consensus on the welfare state fell apart, and the splintering of political opinion into institutional and residualist camps became increasingly evident. By the 1990s, politicians on both the left and the right acknowledged that the welfare state was in need of significant reform, though appreciable differences remained on how much and what type of reform was necessary.

Reforming the welfare state: 1979–97

The political consensus on social security provision broke down in the early 1980s when the administrations of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and Ronald Reagan in the USA attempted to 'roll back' the welfare state significantly. Several criticisms were at the heart of their attempts to reduce welfare provision. The first concerned mounting financial costs. General economic recession in the 1970s, growing unemployment and the emergence of large bureaucracies meant that welfare expenditure continued to increase and at a rate greater than that of overall economic expansion. A heated debate over welfare spending ensued, with advocates of a 'roll-back' pointing to the increasing financial pressure on the welfare system. Policy-makers also emphasized the potentially overwhelming impact of the 'demographic time bomb': the number of people dependent on welfare services was growing as the population aged, yet the number of people of working age paying into the system was declining. This signalled a looming financial crisis.

The 'greying' of the global population is discussed in [chapter 14](), 'The Life Course'.

A second line of criticism was related to the notion of welfare dependency. Critics of existing welfare systems, such as Charles Murray in the USA (discussed earlier), argued that the unintended consequence of generous state assistance was that people become dependent on it – not just materially, but psychologically dependent on the arrival of the welfare payment, adopting a resigned and passive approach to life. The work of Murray and others on the creation of a growing, welfare-dependent underclass framed the political and policy debates on welfare provision in the 1980s and into the 1990s.

The UK Conservative government implemented a number of reforms that began to shift responsibility for public welfare away from the state and towards the private sector, the voluntary sector and local communities. Services previously provided by the state at highly subsidized rates were privatized or made subject to more stringent means-testing. One example of this was the privatization of council housing in the 1980s. The 1980 Housing Act allowed rents for council housing to be raised significantly, laying the groundwork for a large-scale sell-off of stock. This move towards residualism was particularly harmful to those located just above the means-tested eligibility line for housing benefit, as they could no longer get access to public housing, but neither could they afford to rent accommodation at market rates. Critics argue that the privatization of council housing contributed directly to rising homelessness, which doubled from 63,000 in 1980 to 146,000 by 1990 (Malpass and Murie 1999).

Another attempt to reduce welfare expenditure and increase its efficiency came through the introduction of market principles into public services. The Conservative government argued that injecting a degree of competition into services such as healthcare and education

would provide the public with greater choice and ensure higher quality. Consumers could, in effect, 'vote with their feet' by choosing among schools or healthcare providers. Institutions providing substandard services would be obliged to improve or close down, just like a business. Critics charged that 'internal markets' within public services would lead to lower quality and a stratified system of provision rather than protecting the value of equal service for all citizens.

To what extent did Conservative governments of the 1980s and 1990s actually succeed in rolling back the welfare state? In *Dismantling the Welfare State?*, Pierson (1994) compared the process of welfare 'retrenchment' in the UK and the USA and concluded that welfare states emerged from the Conservative era relatively intact. Although both administrations came into office with the express intent of slashing expenditure, Pierson argued that the obstacles to rolling back welfare were ultimately more than either government could overcome. The explanation lies in the way in which social policy unfolded over time. Since its inception, the welfare state and its institutions had given rise to specific constituencies – such as trade unions and voluntary agencies such as the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) – which actively defended benefits against political efforts to reduce them. Social spending stayed fairly constant and, despite numerous policy shifts, all the core components of the welfare state remained in place.

The theory underlying the policies of Margaret Thatcher's government and successive Conservative administrations (1979–97) was that cutting tax rates for individuals and corporations would generate high levels of economic growth, the fruits of which would then 'trickle down' to the poor. Similar policies were implemented in the USA, where, from 1980, the share of national income accruing to the richest 1 per cent began to rise again after decades of reductions. The thesis suggests that this process should lead both to rising levels of economic activity and rising incomes for workers on low incomes. Yet this does not seem to have happened. Banerjee and Duflo (2019) argue that, in the USA, average real wages in 2014 were no higher than in 1979, and the wages of the least educated workers actually fell. Hence, rather than accelerating wage growth, as the thesis predicts, the opposite actually happened. Why?

Pettinger (2016: 141–2) suggests that wealthy individuals may save their increased income from tax cuts rather than spend or reinvest it in business expansion. Many also move their money into tax havens to avoid paying tax – hence, the proposed benefit for society as a whole may be far less than the thesis suggests. In seeking better returns for their higher incomes, wealthy people can also drive 'asset bubbles' in property prices – which can be seen in parts of many large cities today – that make life more difficult for those on low and middle incomes. Tax-cutting policies *can* help to generate economic development, but this policy may not be the most effective way of reducing levels of poverty.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> With reference to Esping-Andersen's (1990) three types of welfare regime (discussed above), which countries would you expect to have the highest levels of 'welfare dependency'? Find out which countries have the highest long-term unemployment and persistent poverty rates. Is there a correlation between type of regime and welfare dependency levels?

Reforming the welfare state: 1997–2010

Welfare reform was a top priority for the Labour government which came to office in 1997. Agreeing in some respects with Conservative critics of welfare (and thus breaking with traditional left politics), 'New' Labour argued that new policies were needed to deal with poverty and inequality as well as to improve health and education. It saw the welfare state, like the residualists, as often part of the problem, creating dependency and offering a 'hand-out' instead of a 'hand-up'.

Instead, Labour wanted to tackle the roots of poverty, arguing that it was pursuing a [Third Way](#) – beyond the politics of the 'old' left and that of the Thatcher government's 'new' right, in a sense beyond the residualist–institutionalist divide. In doing so – initially at least – Labour drew on some of the ideas of the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1994, 1998), which were aimed at modernizing the politics of the left for a global age. These included the strengthening of civil society,

decentralizing power away from the nation-state, a focus on social exclusion rather than inequality, and the use of the private sector to add a dynamic element into public service provision, thereby creating a 'social investment state'.

Initially rejecting the policies of the old left as outdated in an era of individualism, consumerism and globalization, Labour looked to create a 'new left' political position and programme. For example, the party argued that one of the main difficulties with the welfare system was that the conditions under which it had been created no longer existed: it had been inaugurated at a time of full employment when many families could rely on men to work and bring in a 'family wage'. However, changes in family structures had, by the 1990s, rendered such a patriarchal view of the male breadwinner inapplicable. An enormous number of women had entered the workforce, and the growth of lone-parent households placed new demands on the welfare state. Women's earnings have become integral to household income and the impact of their earnings can carry enormous weight. Indeed, the success of dual-earner households, particularly those without children, is one of the most important factors in the shifting pattern of income distribution.

From the outset, Labour focused on a type of 'positive welfare', involving a new 'welfare contract' between the state and citizens covering both rights *and* responsibilities. It saw the role of the state as helping people into work and thereby a stable income, not just supporting them financially through periods of unemployment. At the same time, it expected citizens to take responsibility for trying to change their own circumstances. Employment became a cornerstone of Labour's social policy, as it was believed that getting people into work was one of the main steps to reduce poverty. Among the most significant reforms were Labour's 'welfare-to-work programmes' (see 'Using your sociological imagination' 11.2).

Some of the Labour government's welfare policies did help people into work, particularly young people, and raised levels of funding for public services. Yet the overall approach to welfare has been more harshly judged. Making benefits dependent on a commitment to seek work or to attend job-seeker's interviews has been described as a 'creeping conditionality' which erodes the principle of the citizen's 'entitlement'

(Dwyer 2004). Labour's work-focused programmes (and others in some European countries) were promoted through the language of 'social inclusion', but it is not clear how exclusion relates to underlying problems of social *inequality*. Historically, the latter concern formed the basis of Labour's policy programmes in government.

In *The Inclusive Society*, Ruth Levitas (2005) studied three main discourses – ways of discussing and framing welfare policy – used by Labour since 1997. First, Labour adopted a *redistributionist* discourse, which viewed social exclusion as a *consequence*, not a cause, of poverty and social inequalities. Second, she identified a *moral* discourse on the underclass, which tends to blame those who are excluded, seeing them as responsible for their own situation and, sometimes, as a separate social group with specific characteristics. Third, Levitas notes a *social integrationist* discourse that ties social exclusion and inclusion firmly to employment, encouraging labour market participation as a solution to social exclusion.

The main issue for Levitas is that Labour discourse and policy drifted away from the party's historically dominant, redistributionist approach to welfare, becoming little different from the previous Conservative approach. This separated social exclusion from social inequality and concentrated on the divide between the excluded and the included rather than that between rich and poor, allowing the rich successfully to evade their responsibilities to the wider society. Similarly, MacGregor (2003: 72) argued that Labour dealt mainly with the unacceptable behaviour of the poor – separating out the 'deserving' from the 'undeserving' unemployed, the genuine 'asylum-seeker' from the 'economic migrant', and so on: 'This concentrates on the bad behaviours among the poor, ignoring the drug taking, infidelities, frauds and deceptions and other human frailties found among the rich, the better off and the not-quite-poor.'

The welfare state in an age of austerity: 2010–

After thirteen years of Labour government, the UK general election in 2010 resulted in a 'hung' or 'balanced' parliament with no clear winner, but the Conservatives had most MPs. A coalition government was formed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties, based on

agreement on the new government's economic priorities. At the top of the agenda was reduction of government debt, in part by fundamentally reforming public services and welfare provision. Of course, welfare reform had also been central to the previous Labour governments, but the 2008 financial crisis, the ensuing recession and the perceived need to cut government spending rapidly gave extra impetus to the coalition's rethinking of the welfare state. Taylor-Gooby (2013) argues that the UK welfare state faced a double crisis as a result of harsh spending cuts and a restructuring programme which led to the fragmentation of services and increasing private provision throughout the public sector.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

11.2 Welfare-to-work in the USA

From 1997, the Labour government put forward a number of policies and targets to move people from welfare into work. 'New Deal' programmes were introduced for certain groups, such as disabled people, the long-term unemployed, young people and those aged over fifty. Similar programmes have existed for some time in the United States, and their implications have been studied.

Friedlander and Burtless (1994) examined four different US government-initiated programmes designed to encourage welfare recipients to find paid work. The programmes were roughly similar: they provided financial benefits for those who actively searched for jobs, as well as guidance in job-hunting techniques and opportunities for education and training. The target populations were mainly single-parent heads of households who were recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children, the largest cash welfare programme in the country. Friedlander and Burtless found that the programmes did achieve results. People involved in them were able either to enter employment or to start working sooner than those who did not participate. In all four programmes, the earnings produced were several times greater than the net cost of the programme. They were least effective, however, in helping those who needed them the most – those who had been out of work for a lengthy period, the long-term unemployed.

Although welfare-to-work programmes succeeded in reducing American welfare claims by approximately 40 per cent, some statistics suggest that the outcomes were not entirely positive. In the USA, approximately 20 per cent of those who cease to receive welfare do not work and have no source of independent income; nearly one-third who do get jobs return to claim welfare again within a year. Between a third and a half of welfare leavers who are in work find that their incomes are lower than their previous

benefit levels. In Wisconsin, the US state which was among the first to introduce welfare-to-work programmes, two-thirds of welfare leavers live below the poverty line (Evans 2000). Critics argue that the apparent success of such initiatives in reducing the absolute number of cases conceals some troubling patterns in the experiences of those who lose their welfare.

In the UK, the effectiveness of local empowerment 'zones' for combating social exclusion has been questioned. Many government programmes are targeted as if all the poor live together. Yet, in the UK, the government's Social Exclusion Unit argued that, when Labour came to power in 1997, two-thirds of all unemployed people lived *outside* the forty-four most deprived boroughs in the country. This suggests that local initiatives are no substitute for a nationwide anti-poverty strategy, as many people fall outside the boundaries of designated empowerment zones.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Why do you think these programmes fail to help the long-term unemployed to find work? List the obstacles facing those who have been unemployed for more than a year. What can governments do to remove these obstacles?

Underpinning the coalition's reforms was the central idea that 'work should pay'. That is, people should always be better off in work than if they lived wholly on welfare benefits. The secretary of state for work and pensions, Iain Duncan Smith, set out the centrepiece of welfare reform in his idea of a new Universal Credit (DWP 2010).

Duncan Smith argued that the new system should always reward, not penalize, those who pursue work. Universal Credit allows people moving from benefit into work to keep more of their earnings by reducing their benefits gradually. A related aim was to simplify the benefits system, making it easier to understand and less expensive to administer, which would help individuals to receive the benefits to which they are entitled and reduce the opportunities for people to 'play the system' or commit fraud. To achieve this, the new Universal Credit

was to be phased in for new claimants from 2013, replacing six income-related benefits (DWP 2010: 14). Because Universal Credit is income-related, the government argued that it would reduce poverty levels among working families.

The drug-taking of celebrities is often a source of entertainment for glossy magazines. But the negative aspects of addiction are associated with the poor and socially excluded and can lead to these groups being targeted in police searches.

A raft of other changes were made in the Welfare Reform Act (2012). A benefit cap of £26,000 per year limited the total amount of welfare any household could receive. This was aimed at ensuring that households cannot receive more in welfare than the median (aftertax) earnings of those in work. However, the cap took no account of the cost of rent and living expenses in different parts of the country, with London being particularly expensive. Child benefit would continue to be paid to families where anyone earns over £50,000 per year, but it would be effectively 'reclaimed' by an increase in income tax. Indirectly, this move ended the universality of this longstanding benefit. Disability benefits were also changed, with a new Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

replacing Disability Living Allowance from 2013. PIPs remain non-means tested, but recipients faced new 'objective assessments' of their individual needs, a move that has proved distressing for many disabled people, who now had to 'justify' their disabled status in the system.

One of the most controversial new measures was a change to housing benefit paid to council and housing association tenants. The government argued that social housing tenants with spare bedrooms were effectively being paid a 'spare room subsidy'. It therefore reduced the amount of housing benefit if tenants had 'too many' bedrooms. For example, the benefit is reduced by 14 per cent for one bedroom and 25 per cent for two or more 'unused bedrooms', forcing people to pay part of their rent. The Labour opposition dubbed this an unfair 'bedroom tax' that would have a particularly severe impact on older people, whose relatives may use their spare room(s) intermittently, and disabled people who need spare bedrooms for the storage of equipment and overnight stays by carers and helpers.

In 2015, the election of a majority Conservative government ensured that the central thrust of the coalition's welfare reform continued. It came to office with a plan to cut a further £12 billion from the welfare budget, continuing the strategy of shrinking the welfare state. In outlining its policy to allow private housing association tenants to buy their rented properties at below market value and to force councils to sell off their most valuable homes, the new government established a clear line of continuity with Margaret Thatcher's housing privatization agenda. The announcement of an increased minimum wage, rebadged as a 'national living wage', also continued the Conservatives' key theme of 'making work pay' (Stewart 2015).

The UK case illustrates how a politics and discourse of austerity garnered public support for measures to reduce welfare spending, limit numbers of eligible claimants, and move people off welfare and into fragmented, increasingly destabilized labour markets. Accompanying this was a political discourse which overtly criticizes state welfare, demonizes citizens as 'benefit claimants', and privileges private over public sector provision. Lister (2011) argued that we have entered an 'age of responsibility' in which the poorest in society are made to feel and fulfil their obligations as 'responsible' citizens. However, Hills

(2014: viii) notes that opinion polls picked up a shift in attitudes as austerity measures began to bite. Support for redistributing income from the 'better-off' to the 'less well-off' began to rise, and by 2013 around 42 per cent agreed that redistribution was a good idea. Nonetheless, Taylor-Gooby and Stoker (2011: 14) argue that the welfare state's resistance to change is at its weakest, and European governments are 'rolling back the state to a level of intervention below that in the United States – something which is unprecedented.'

However, the drawn-out process of leaving the EU between 2016 and early 2020 took up much government time, and this was followed by the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic, which led to the largest ever peacetime expansion of state intervention in society and the economy. As a result, it now seems inevitable that there will be a major debate and rethinking of social security provision and welfare reform policy in the decade ahead.

New challenges for old welfare states

Modern, post-1945 welfare states were created at a time of economic reconstruction and industrial development when men were perceived as 'breadwinners' requiring a 'family wage'. In the twenty-first century, European societies have moved far away from such conditions, and as a result their welfare states have been incrementally changing for quite some time.

Yet, despite a seemingly continuous process of welfare reform, welfare states have actually proved to be remarkably resilient to fundamental change (Pierson 2011). Some argue that welfare policy creates interest communities which defend the status quo and make experimentation with radical policy changes electorally risky – a kind of in-built inertia. However, welfare states continue as the pre-eminent model largely because the longstanding social problems remain of persistent poverty, low wages, ageing populations and inadequate housing stock, alongside more recent issues of the rising gig economy, precarious forms of work and the growth of in-work poverty. State provision of social security for citizens remains as necessary today as it was in the 1940s.

Hemerijck (2013: 15) argues that there are socio-economic factors pushing governments to look for a new welfare state model that is adequate in a global context. He sees these as exogenous, endogenous, historical, supranational and political. The main *exogenous* factor is intensified international competition, especially from emerging economies, which presents new challenges for the stability of Europe's redistributive welfare states. *Endogenous* factors include the economic shift away from manufacturing and towards services, rapidly increasing numbers of women in employment, known as the 'feminization' of work, high-skill labour markets and the fragmentation of employment relations, and ageing populations, which bring higher demand for health services and long-term care (ibid.: 127).

The *historical* legacy of 'old social risks' means that large sums of public money are still directed at unemployment insurance, disability benefits and relatively generous old-age pensions. These set financial limits to

how new policy challenges are tackled, though recovery planning in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, following on from a decade of austerity politics after the 2008 financial crash, may well impinge on the size and scope of social security provision in the coming years. The *supranational* institutions of the European Union also impact on the ability of national welfare states to manage their domestic demands. In a very real sense, welfare states have become 'semi-sovereign' (Ferrera 2005). The *political* challenges come from the well-established decline in party loyalty, electoral volatility and the increasingly widespread antipathy to increasing EU integration alongside anti-immigration sentiment; all were significant factors in 2016 when the UK voted to leave the EU. What these five elements collectively produce is a growing pressure for fundamental reform of the welfare state, even before the global pandemic and its social, economic and political consequences.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. Explain the difference between *absolute* and *relative* poverty. Has absolute poverty been eliminated from the relatively wealthy countries of the Global North?

2. What are the main ways of measuring how much poverty exists? What do we learn from these about the extent of poverty?

3. Many people move into and out of poverty over the life course. List some of the circumstances that often lead to people falling into poverty.

4. Child poverty has proved to be a persistent social problem. What are the consequences of poverty in childhood and why is it so difficult to eliminate?

5. How have sociologists sought to explain the persistence of poverty in the high-income countries? Do we need elements of both individualistic and social-structural explanations if we are to create a more powerful explanatory framework?

6. How could it be argued that social exclusion is closely related to poverty? Provide two examples of social exclusion, showing how the concept of *intersectionality* strengthens our understanding of real-world exclusion.

7. Explain what is meant by a 'welfare state' and discuss how the welfare state model spread. Outline the key differences between *institutionalists* and *residualists* in debates on what the welfare state should be.

8. What have been the key shifts in the formation and development of the UK welfare state? In what ways does the UK welfare state differ from other European versions?

9. What was the 'welfare consensus' which existed until the 1970s? How has this consensus been challenged since 1979?

10. What political and policy evidence is there that the residualist perspective has definitively won the argument on welfare reform in the UK?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

It is commonly held that those individuals and households in poverty are, in large measure, responsible for their own situation through their lack of effort in finding work. Overly generous state benefits are said to have created a situation of welfare dependency for many people living in poverty. In recent years such views have been seriously challenged as researchers have discovered widespread 'in-work' poverty. But what kinds of work and in which employment sectors are people more likely to find themselves in situations of poverty? Is there evidence that people and households can change their situation through their own actions or is state intervention the only way of reducing poverty levels? Read the paper below, which explores these issues in light of the major changes in labour markets in the UK over the last thirty years or so.

Sissons, P., Green, A. E., and Lee, N. (2018) 'Linking the Sectoral Employment Structure and Household Poverty in the United Kingdom', *Work, Employment and Society*, 32(6): 1078–98.

1. How would you characterize this research and what are its main sources of evidence?

2. 'Low pay does not necessarily translate to poverty at the household level.' Why not? What mitigating factors do the authors suggest are in play?

3. Which employment sectors have the highest and lowest poverty rates? How does the paper explain the highest sectoral poverty rates?

4. '... second household earners significantly reduce the risk of poverty.' This may suggest an individualistic explanation of household poverty, but the authors argue that poverty rates are more complex than this. Discuss the nature of this complexity in relation to labour market change, job quality, individual actions and state policy.

5. What does this paper tell us about the polarized debate between individualistic and structural theories of poverty? For instance,

does it support either thesis or does it argue for an alternative to both?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

In the twenty-first century there is an intensifying debate on what welfare states should look like and how they will survive. The implication is that the welfare state model which has developed since the 1940s cannot survive in its present form and is now in need of major reform. In 2017, the director of the London School of Economics and Political Science, Minouche Shafik, gave a lecture on this subject which set out both the problem and some possible solutions for a 'Beveridge 2.0' welfare state. A transcript of the lecture can be found at www.lse.ac.uk/Events/Events-Assets/PDF/2017/2017-MT03/20171129-MinoucheShafik-Transcript.pdf.

Read this analysis and provide a summary of it covering the suggested threats to existing welfare provision and Shafik's proposed changes for a more sustainable society. In your final discussion section, provide an assessment as to Beveridge 2.0 actually becoming reality. In particular, explore some of the social and political obstacles that such changes may face.

⭐ <u>Society in the arts</u>

The realities of living in poverty are no longer under-represented in the mass media, especially television. Over recent decades there has been a trend in so-called reality shows which purport to document the everyday lives of people and households in poverty. For example, in the UK we have seen numerous series with titles such as *Skint* (Channel 4), *On Benefits and Proud* (Channel 5) and *Benefits Street* (Channel 4). Programme makers argue that these shows, although clearly designed as entertainment, are also educational, raising awareness of the impact of poverty and the state benefits system.

However, for critics and many academics, such programmes are best described as a form of 'poverty porn', which presents a one-sided, stereotypical view of poverty as the province of individual 'benefit scroungers' who are blamed for their situation. The concept of poverty porn has also been used in relation to some campaigning films made by charities such as Comic Relief, which, again, present unhelpful, stereotypical imagery that fails to aid understanding of poverty and its causes.

Search online and watch some of the programmes (or charity documentaries) described as poverty porn. Write a 1,000-word essay comparing what sociological research tells us about poverty and its causes with the case(s) presented in these reality shows. Are the individuals being filmed held to be responsible for their own situation? What do the shows have to say about work, employment, social security and the state benefits system? Do shows of this kind have any positive, educational benefits for the watching public?

🔖 **Further reading**

A good introduction to issues of poverty and social exclusion is Stephen Armstrong's (2017) *The New Poverty* (London: Verso), which is lively, very well written and reliable. Stewart Lansley and Joanna Mack's (2015) *Breadline Britain: The Rise of Mass Poverty* (London: Oneworld) provides an account of poverty and public perceptions of it. A broader perspective on poverty and how it is defined and measured can be found in Anthony B. Atkinson's (2019) *Measuring Poverty around the World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). The concept of social exclusion can then be explored in John Pierson's (2016) *Tackling Poverty and Social Exclusion: Promoting Social Justice in Social Work* (3rd edn, London: Routledge), which is aimed at social workers but still covers all of the key sociological issues.

A stimulating and accessible introduction to welfare states is David Garland's (2016) *The Welfare State: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Derek Fraser's (2017) *The Evolution of the British Welfare State* (5th edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) is a reliable account of the British case. From here, *The Welfare State Reader* (2014), edited by Christopher Pierson, Francis G. Castles and Ingela K. Naumann (3rd edn, Cambridge: Polity), is a wide-ranging and very useful resource.

@ Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Eurostat on Living Conditions – contains statistical data on living conditions, including poverty and social exclusion, across the EU:
https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Living_conditions

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – UK organization funding research aimed at understanding and eradicating poverty and social exclusion.
www.jrf.org.uk/

The Townsend Centre for International Poverty Research, based at Bristol University, UK – some very useful resources on poverty and social exclusion:
www.bris.ac.uk/poverty/

The Child Poverty Action Group, UK – the best-known and a well-respected campaigning group. This site has lots of information and publications on child poverty:
https://cpag.org.uk/

The Governance and Social Development Resource Centre – established by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) in 2005; covers all aspects of social exclusion:
https://gsdrc.org/topic-guides/social-exclusion/

OECD site on Social and Welfare Issues – covers poverty reduction plans and OECD targets:
www.oecd.org/social/

The World Bank's Poverty Reduction and Equity site – lots of reading lists, information and more:
www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty

CHAPTER 12

SOCIAL INTERACTION AND DAILY LIFE

CONTENTS

Online gaming is extremely popular and, though existing friends play together, many young people say they have made new friends through gaming and social media – a small example of the way that digital media facilitates new forms of communication and social interaction.

If online social media such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram are to be believed, people today have never had so many friends. But are online 'friends' really friends or merely followers, contacts and acquaintances? Research by the Pew Research Center found that 57 per cent of teenagers (those aged thirteen to seventeen) in the USA had made at least one new friend online, mostly via gaming (36 per cent) or on social media (64 per cent). Some 29 per cent had made more than five new friends online. Boys made more friends through networked gaming, 71 per cent of them using voice connections to communicate with friends during play. Girls made more friends on social media, with almost one-third (32 per cent) using instant messaging to communicate with friends every day (Lenhart et al. 2015: 2–5). Interacting online clearly has the potential to expand friendship networks.

This survey opens a window into the ways in which young people are navigating their friendships in the digital age, and the findings raise an important issue for sociologists. Could online friending and unfriending, following and unfollowing, be changing the definition and meaning of friendship itself? The survey found that 80 per cent of

teenagers had never met any of their online friends in person, suggesting that, for most teenagers, online friendships stay online. Yet 68 per cent of US teenagers said that their social media friends and contacts had helped them through some difficult times, a crucial part of what it means to be 'a good friend'. Perhaps online-only interactions *can* produce some of the elements we expect of genuine friendships.

The Pew survey also hints at some of the negative aspects of online interaction. Some 88 per cent thought that people share too much personal information on social media, 39 per cent felt pressure to post content that would make them more popular, 26 per cent had become involved in conflict with a friend over online posts, and 21 per cent reported feeling worse about their lives because of what they saw on social media (Lenhart et al. 2015: 6–11); 68 per cent reported seeing social media users 'stirring up drama', a phrase often used to discuss bullying.

Bullying and harassment can have severe psychological consequences long after the bullying has ended. Laura Martocci (2015: xi–xii) describes the way that memories of being bullied in the past came back while she studied for a doctorate: '[Yet] even now, as I sit in front of my computer and contemplate sharing this story I shudder, I feel a faint inner quaking. I imagine *her* reading the words and reviving her campaigns of subversion. I can *feel* the exaggerated eye roll that curdled my confidence, the one that preceded a contemptuous "*Ohhhh pleeeeeeassse*" ....' For Martocci, being bullied was an experience that changed her own self-concept, the very essence of her identity. She asks, 'What could have caused me to view accomplishments as inconsequential and self-image as fraudulent? How did I come to believe that the angry, insecure woman I was reduced to was my true self, unmasked at last?'

The basis of a sociological answer comes in the realization that our individual self is not a 'thing', like a 'pearl' sitting within the 'shell' of the biological human body. Rather, the self is, in part, a social creation that is built from a whole series of relationships and interactions with other people. That is why the type and quality of the interactions we have with others have the potential to change our perception of who we 'really' are – our true self, as it were. Bullying, however else we may

characterize it, is a particular type of social interaction which involves the attempt to exercise power over others.

Sociological theories of self-formation and identity can be found in chapter 14, 'The Life Course', and chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Cyberbullying is 'an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself' (Smith et al. 2008: 376). This can be an extension of physical bullying, but in many cases it is wholly online, through text, email or social media. Those involved in the interaction may never meet face to face, but, like traditional bullying, the cyber form uses gossip, stigmatizing, stereotyping, ostracizing and shaming. Unlike traditional forms, comments on gaming sites or internet forums have a much wider reach.

John Halligan (2012: vii), whose thirteen-year-old son Ryan took his own life as a result of being bullied, points out that 'It's one thing to be bullied and humiliated in front of a few kids. It's one thing to feel rejection and have your heart crushed by a girl. But it must be a totally different experience, compared to a generation ago, to have these hurts and humiliation witnessed by a far larger, online adolescent audience.' By contrast, internet bullies and so-called trolls (who set out to disrupt forums or provoke emotional responses) operate anonymously and are able to depersonalize their targets, thereby avoiding the emotional consequences and protecting their own self-image. New forms of friendship and online bullying behaviour are just two aspects of the digital age which sociologists are striving to understand. But existing theories and concepts from studies of social interaction are an excellent place to begin that task.

Next, we set out some key concepts and ideas which sociologists have used to study the micro level of social interactions. Many, though by no

means all, of these ideas and concepts developed within the interactionist tradition before becoming common currency in sociology. We begin with some 'hidden' aspects of human communication, such as unacknowledged body language and gestures, before moving on to look at the unwritten 'rules' of interaction and what happens when we break those rules. From here we are able to set our encounters within shifting social contexts, and in the final sections we explore some of the emerging rules and norms of behaviour in online environments. The chapter ends with the question of whether people will still privilege face-to-face contact over cyber communication as daily life becomes saturated with digital devices and online environments.

A detailed discussion of the interactionist tradition can be found in [chapter 3](), 'Theories and Perspectives'.

[Studying the micro level](#)

Walk through a crowded shopping centre or step onto a busy train and you will notice people glancing at one another quickly before looking away again to carry on walking or to find a seat, usually without conversing. These people, including ourselves, are demonstrating what Erving Goffman (1967, 1971) calls [civil inattention](#), which is not the same as just ignoring each other. Each individual indicates recognition of other people but avoids any gesture that might be seen as intrusive or which might be perceived as hostile. In a sense, civil inattention is the opposite of bullying. While the latter is action focused and targeted on a specific individual, the former represents a studious yet, with practice, more or less unconscious form of *avoidance* of direct contact.

Civil inattention is something we may all recognize, but why should sociologists concern themselves with such apparently trivial aspects of life? Passing someone on the street or exchanging a few words with a friend are things we do countless times every day. Yet, just because we do not have to think about our everyday routines does not mean they fall outside sociological analysis. In fact, Alfred Schutz (1899–1959) saw them as the starting point for [phenomenology](#) – the study of how people arrive at that taken-for-granted attitude and how it is reproduced in interactions (see [chapter 3](#), 'Theories and Perspectives', for a discussion of Schutz and phenomenology).

Conventionally, interaction is taken to mean face-to-face meetings or 'the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another's actions when in one another's immediate physical presence' (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 26). With the advent of online environments such as chatrooms, blogs and social media, a broader definition that takes in these new forms seems appropriate. Alex Dennis and his colleagues (2013: 1) suggest that social interaction can be defined as 'the actions and responses of people to each other's activities'. The study of apparently insignificant forms of [social interaction](#) is of major importance in sociology and is one of the discipline's most absorbing subjects. There are three main reasons for this.

First, our day-to-day routines and constant interactions with others give structure and form to what we do. We can learn a great deal about ourselves as social beings and about the nature of social life from studying them. Our lives are organized around the repetition of similar patterns of behaviour from day to day, and we may only realize this when they are disrupted. The 2019–20 Covid-19 pandemic was just such a radical disruption, as many workplaces, schools and colleges were closed, and people were forced to stay at home and told not to meet with friends and family. With regular social spaces effectively closed down, many people reported that they struggled to fill their days or construct a meaningful new daily routine.

Think of what you did yesterday and the day before that. If they were both weekdays, it is likely that you got up at about the same time each day. If you are a student, you may have gone to a class in the morning, making the journey from home to campus that you do most weekdays. Of course, the everyday routines we follow are not identical and our patterns of activity at weekends usually contrast with those on weekdays. If we make a major change such as leaving college to take a job, alterations in daily routines are necessary, but we establish a new and fairly regular set of habits all over again.

Second, the study of daily life reveals how humans act creatively to shape social reality. Although our behaviour is guided by social roles, norms and shared expectations, individuals perceive reality differently according to their background, interests and motivations. Because individuals are capable of creative action, they continuously shape reality through the decisions and actions they take. In other words, social reality is not a fixed or static 'thing' but is created through human interaction. This idea of the 'social construction of reality' lies at the heart of the symbolic interactionist perspective and was introduced briefly in chapter 1 (see chapter 5, 'The Environment', for a more detailed outline of social constructionism).

Third, studying social interaction sheds light on social institutions. All social institutions depend on the patterns of social interaction that we engage in daily. Consider again the case of two strangers passing in the street. The event may seem to have little direct relevance to large-scale, structured and more permanent forms of social organization. But when

we take into account many, many such interactions, this is no longer so. In the contemporary world, most people live in towns and cities and constantly interact with people they do not know personally. But the bustling crowds and fleeting, impersonal contacts give city life its vibrant character. City life is effectively reproduced via the myriad interactions of both inhabitants and visitors.

Keep in mind that micro-level everyday practices are not separate from the large-scale, macro features of social life that we explore in other chapters. Indeed, some of the very best sociological work connects micro and macro phenomena to give us a more detailed and rounded picture of the social world.

Theories of the impact of social structures on the everyday 'lifeworld' can be found in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Non-verbal communication

Social interaction involves numerous forms of <u>non-verbal communication</u> – the exchange of information and meaning through facial expressions, gestures and movements of the body. Non-verbal communication is sometimes referred to as 'body language', but this can be misleading, because people characteristically use non-verbal cues to eliminate or expand on what is said with words.

The human face, gestures and emotions

A central feature of non-verbal communication is the facial expression of emotions. When we compare the human face with other species, it does seem remarkably flexible and capable of manipulation. The German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) argued that studying the face shows how human beings, like all other species, have naturally evolved over a long period of time, but also how this biological basis has been overlain with cultural features in the process of *social development*.

Compare the human face with that of our closest evolutionary relatives, the apes. The ape face is furry and quite rigid in structure, permitting a limited amount of movement. The human face, in contrast, is naked and very flexible, capable of contorting into a wide variety of positions. In some parts of the world, 'gurning' competitions are even held to see who can pull the strangest facial expressions, and some of these appear *very* strange indeed. Without this evolved physiological malleability, human communication as we know it would be impossible. Therefore, Elias (1987a) sees the development of the human face as closely linked to the evolutionary 'survival value' of effective communication systems. While apes do make extensive use of 'whole body' communication, humans can communicate a varied range of emotions on just the 'signalling board' of the face. For Elias, facial communication demonstrates that, in human beings, the biological and the social are inextricably intertwined. As Martocci records in our chapter

introduction, even a simple rolling of the eyes and the meaning it conveys can exert an impact that lasts a lifetime.

Paul Ekman's photographs of the facial expressions of a tribesman from a remote community in New Guinea tested the idea that there are basic modes of emotional expression. Look carefully at each facial expression. Which of the six emotions used by Ekman above do you think is being conveyed in each one? Check by looking at the 'Thinking critically' box on the next page.

The American psychologist Paul Ekman and his colleagues developed a Facial Action Coding System (FACS) to describe movements of the facial muscles that give rise to particular expressions. Their system aimed at injecting precision into an area notoriously open to inconsistent and contradictory interpretations. This is because there has been little agreement about how emotions should be identified and classified. Charles Darwin claimed that there are basic modes of emotional expression that are common across the human species. And, though this is disputed, Ekman's research, covering people from widely different cultures, provides some supportive evidence. Ekman and Friesen (1978) carried out a study of an isolated community in New Guinea whose members had virtually no contact with outsiders. When they were shown pictures of faces expressing six emotions (happiness, sadness, anger, disgust, fear, surprise), the New Guineans were able to identify which emotions were being expressed.

Ekman argues that the results of his own and similar studies support the view that the facial expression of emotion and its interpretation are innate in human beings, though he acknowledges the evidence does not conclusively demonstrate this as it may be that widely shared cultural

learning is involved. Nonetheless, other types of research support his conclusion. The human ethologist Irenäus Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1973) studied six children who were born deaf and blind to see how far their facial expressions were similar in particular emotional situations to those of sighted, hearing individuals. He found that the children smiled when engaged in obviously pleasurable activities, raised their eyebrows in surprise when sniffing an object with an unaccustomed smell and frowned when repeatedly offered an object they disliked. Using the FACS, Ekman and Friesen identified a number of discrete facial muscle actions in new-born infants that are also found in adult expressions of emotion. For instance, infants seem to produce facial expressions similar to the adult expression of disgust (pursing the lips and frowning) in response to sour tastes.

THINKING CRITICALLY

From left to right, Ekman's instructions were to show how your face would look if:

1. your friend had come and you were *happy*

2. your child had died and you were *sad*

3. you were *angry* and about to fight

4. you saw a dead pig that had been lying there a long time: *disgust*.

Is it easier to see the emotions being expressed when you know the context?

Have you ever misunderstood how someone is feeling, and, if so, why did their facial expression not give away their emotional state?

Although the facial expression of emotion seems to be innate, individual and cultural factors influence the exact form that facial movements take and the contexts in which they are deemed appropriate. Exactly *how* people smile, the precise movement of the lips and other facial muscles, and how fleeting the smile is all vary between cultures.

By contrast, there are no gestures or bodily postures that have been shown to characterize all, or even most, cultures. In some societies, people nod when they mean 'no' while in others a nod means 'yes'. Gestures that Europeans and Americans tend to use a great deal, such as finger pointing, seem not to exist in other cultures (Bull 1983). Similarly, a straightened forefinger placed at the centre of the cheek and rotated is used in parts of Italy as a gesture of praise, but seems unknown elsewhere. Like facial expressions, gestures and bodily posture are used to fill out our utterances as well as conveying meanings when nothing is actually spoken. All three can be used to joke or show irony or scepticism.

The non-verbal impressions we convey often inadvertently indicate that what we say is not quite what we mean. Blushing is perhaps the most obvious example of how physical indicators can contradict our stated meanings. But there are more subtle signs that can be picked up by other people. A trained eye can often detect deceit by studying non-verbal cues. Sweating, fidgeting, staring or shifting eyes and facial expressions held for a long time (genuine facial expressions tend to evaporate after four or five seconds) could indicate that a person is acting deceptively. Thus, we use the facial expressions and bodily gestures of other people to add to what they communicate verbally and to check how far they are sincere and whether they can be trusted.

Gender and the body

Marcel Mauss (1973) was among the first to argue that gestures and bodily movements are not simply natural but are linked to social context. People learn how to use their bodies in walking, digging, eating, and much more, and these 'techniques of the body' are transmitted across generations. But is there a gender dimension to everyday social interactions? Because interactions are shaped by the larger social context, it is not really surprising that both verbal and non-verbal communication may be perceived and expressed differently by men and women. There are also social class and ethnic dimensions to embodied interactions.

The political philosopher Iris Marion Young (1949–2006) explored gendered bodily experience in a famous article, 'Throwing Like a Girl' (1980, 2005). Young argued that the apparently distinctive 'half-hearted' movements made by women – such as throwing a ball or stones – are not biologically determined but the product of discourses and practices which encourage girls and young women to experience their bodies as 'objects for others'. Such bodily training embodies an 'inhibited intentionality' reflecting feminine norms of restricted bodily comportment and movement. In short, male-dominated societies produce a majority of women who are essentially 'physically handicapped'. In contrast, men learn to experience their bodies as active and forceful 'objects for themselves', which is reflected in their more aggressive bodily movements, particularly noticeable in sports. For young boys, therefore, to be accused of 'throwing like a girl' is a dreadful insult and an attack on their male identity.

On public transport, 'manspreading' – the open posture often adopted by men – is a routine expression of male power, contrasting with the inward-directed posture of women. In 2017, Madrid authorities included manspreading in its list of prohibitions on public transport.

These dynamics are evident even in routine social interactions. Take one of the most common non-verbal expressions: eye contact. Individuals use eye contact in a wide variety of ways, often to catch someone's attention or to begin a social interaction, but, in many patriarchal societies, norms of behaviour suggest that men can stare at women and not expect a similar response – a clear non-verbal expression of power relations. Yet men are not expected to stare at other men. Doing so risks 'an aggressive, "Who are you staring at" response' (Jeffreys 2015: 22). Taken individually, such cases may seem inconsequential, but collectively they help to reinforce patterns of gender inequality (Burgoon et al. 1996). As gender relations have become more equal and women routinely enter public spaces, the previously dominant male gaze is increasingly challenged and redefined as 'unwanted attention' and one form of everyday sexism.

There are other gender differences in non-verbal communication. Men tend to sit in more relaxed ways than women, leaning back with their legs apart, whereas women tend to have a more closed body position, sitting upright, with hands in their lap and legs crossed. Women tend to stand closer to the person they are talking to than men, while men make physical contact with women during conversation far more often than the other way around. Other studies have shown that women show their emotions more explicitly through facial expressions and seek and break eye contact more often than men.

These seemingly inconsequential, micro-level interactions reinforce wider macro-level inequalities. Men control more space when standing and sitting than women and also demonstrate control through more frequent physical contact. Women tend to seek approval through eye contact and facial expressions, but, when men make eye contact, a woman is more likely than another man to look away. In all these ways, non-verbal forms of communication provide subtle cues, which demonstrate men's power over women in the wider society (Young 1990).

In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argued that expressions of gendered identities illustrate that gender is mainly 'performative'. What does she mean by this? Butler says that many feminists have rejected the idea that gender is biologically or naturally fixed. But, in doing so,

they separated gender (culture) from sex (biology), arguing that gendered norms of behaviour were built upon biologically determined male and female bodies. Butler rejects this position, arguing instead that there are *no* biologically determined identities lying beneath the cultural expressions of gender.

Gender identities are established precisely *through* their continuous performance. Hence, there is no essential, natural or biological basis to gender even though the belief that there is remains widespread. Butler's position is that gender identity is not a question of *who you are*, but *what you do*, and it therefore follows that gender identities are much more fluid and unstable than previously thought. This does not mean that people have an entirely free choice of gender identity, as performances involve regularized and repetitively produced gender norms that are enforced by prohibitions, ostracism and other forms of censure (Butler 1993). Yet, if Butler is right, there is more scope for people to make active choices on how they perform gender and thus to resist the dominant or hegemonic forms of gendered identity.

See chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', for Connell's wider theory of hegemony in relation to gender and identity.

Embodiment and identities

The gendering of bodily experience and movement described above complements theories of gender identity, which are discussed in detail in chapter 14, 'The Life Course'. As that chapter shows, people *learn* gender roles and gendered behaviour from a very early age in interactions with significant others such as family members. What we can add to this from sociological work on bodily experience and non-verbal communication is that a person's gender identity is also expressed through experience of their own and other people's bodies and bodily movements. Thus gender identity is both socially created

and 'embodied'. In fact, the general concept of identity has become central to many areas of sociology over recent years. But what is an identity?

Richard Jenkins (2008: 5) says that identity is 'the human capacity – rooted in language – to know "who's who" (and hence "what's what"). This involves knowing who we are, knowing who others are, them knowing who we are, us knowing who they think we are, and so on.' It follows that all identities are 'social identities' because they are formed in the continuing processes of interaction. Identities are made, not given, and as a result are fluid over time. Even so, they are experienced by the individual as essentially internally consistent and relatively stable (Scott 2015: 2). There are three key aspects of identities: they are partly individual or personal; they are partly collective or social; and they are always 'embodied'. As Jenkins (2008: 68) puts it:

> Selves without bodies don't make much sense in human terms. Even ghosts or spirits, if we recognise them as human, once had bodies; even the disembodied world of cyberspace depends, in the not-so-final resort, on bodies in front of computer screens. We reach out with our selves and others reach out to us.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

12.1 Everyday sexism in public places

The study of small-scale face-to-face interactions and the study of social structures and institutions are inextricably connected (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Giddens 1984). For instance, Gardner (1995) found that, in various settings, unwanted attention, such as wolf-whistling and sexual comments from men, was frequently experienced by women as 'sexual harassment', a term that originated in the feminist movements of the 1970s. Such forms of harassment are typical of street talk and behaviour, and Gardner linked the harassment of women by men to the wider system of gender inequality, represented by male privilege in public spaces, women's physical vulnerability and the omnipresent threat of assault and rape.

Almost twenty years later, the Everyday Sexism Project (a UK web-based project that now includes books by Laura Bates (2014, 2018)) was created specifically to allow people to record their experiences of routine or mundane sexism at work, in the street, while shopping, and so on. For instance, an anonymous poster – a lawyer – recorded that, after successfully defending a haulage company in court, the director of the company turned to her and said, 'Good girl'. Others report persistent and routine catcalls and sexual comments, such as 'I'd have some of that', made by men both on foot and from vehicles as they walk to work. The kinds of behaviour observed by Gardner in the mid-1990s continue in this century, though there is more awareness of their unacceptability.

Clearly, individual instances of verbal harassment must be related to shifting public norms and legal standards if they are to be properly understood. Understanding the link between micro and macro levels also shows that it is not enough to try to teach people good manners. To tackle the problem of sexual harassment also demands challenging gender inequality in all spheres of life.

"So far, so good. Now let's hear your wolf-whistling."

THINKING CRITICALLY

Read some of the individual cases of sexist behaviour from the Everyday Sexism website (link at the end of this chapter). It is relatively easy to link some of these to our own observations, but there has also been some movement in the direction of gender equality across society. What bodily postures, behavioural changes and non-verbal signs by both men and women have you witnessed that may evidence this shift towards increasing equality?

A good example of the close linkage between social identity and embodiment is Erving Goffman's (1963) study of 'stigma'. Goffman shows how some disabled people, for example, can be stigmatized on the basis of observable physical impairments, which he calls 'discredited stigma', as this means a loss of control over the presentation of self and the management of individual identity. On the other hand, some impairments that are not readily observable (such as epilepsy) can be more easily hidden from public view and therefore may allow the individual more control over the management of their identity. For this reason, Goffman calls this type of impairment a potentially 'discreditable stigma'.

Identities are also multi-layered, consisting of several sources, but a simple distinction can be made between *primary* and *secondary* identities, which are connected to the processes of primary and secondary socialization respectively. Primary identities are those formed in early life and include gender, race/ethnicity and perhaps also disability. Secondary identities build on these and include those associated with social roles and achieved statuses such as occupational roles and status positions. Social identities are quite complex and fluid, changing as people gain new roles or leave behind old ones.

An important consequence of the discussion so far is that identities mark out *similarities* and *differences*. Individual or personal identity makes one *feel* quite unique and different from other people, especially in individualized modern societies, and is perceived by others as such. Our personal names are one illustration of this individual difference. In many societies, parents increasingly seek out unusual names for their offspring to mark them out as different from the crowd, rather than choosing names linked to family or ones that are commonly used. For many people today, naming offspring is a matter of parental choice rather than an expression of family ties.

By contrast, collective identities display similarity. To identify yourself and be identified as part of an ethnic group, working class, an environmentalist or a professional sociologist can be a source of group solidarity, pride or perhaps even shame. But, whatever the perception we have of our social identity, Goffman's point holds: that individual and social identities are tightly bound together within the embodied self (Burkitt 1999).

THINKING CRITICALLY

List all of the various sources of your own identity, both individual and social. Try to rank these in order of their importance to your sense of personal identity. How has this ranking order changed over time? Why do you think some sources have become less significant for you while others have increased in significance? What conclusion do you draw about the balance between ascribed and achieved aspects of your identity?

Actors, stage-sets and complementary roles

Let us summarize what we have learned so far. Everyday interaction depends on subtle relationships between what we convey with our faces and bodies and what we express in words. We use the facial expressions and bodily gestures of other people to expand on what they communicate verbally and to check if they are sincere. But, as we shall see, we also organize our activities in the contexts of social life to achieve the same ends.

Encounters

In many social situations we engage in unfocused interaction with others. Unfocused interaction takes place whenever people exhibit mutual awareness of one another's presence. This is normally the case where large numbers of people assemble together, as on busy streets in cinemas or at parties. When people are in the presence of others they continually communicate non-verbally through their posture and facial and physical gestures.

Focused interaction occurs when individuals attend directly to what others say or do. Social interaction often involves both focused and unfocused exchanges. An instance of focused interaction is called an encounter, and much day-to-day life consists of encounters with family, friends and colleagues, frequently occurring against the background of unfocused interaction with others who happen to be present. Small talk, seminar discussions, games and routine face-to-face contacts with ticket attendants and shop assistants are all examples of encounters.

Like conversations, encounters always need 'openings', which indicate that civil inattention is being discarded. When strangers meet and begin to talk, the moment of ceasing civil inattention is always risky, since misunderstandings can easily occur about the nature of the encounter (Goffman 1971). Hence making eye contact may at first be ambiguous and tentative. The person looking to make eye contact can then act as though they had made no direct move if the overture is not accepted. In focused interaction, each person communicates as much by

facial expression and gestures as by the words exchanged. Goffman distinguishes between the expressions individuals 'give' and those they 'give off'. The first are the words and facial expressions people use to produce certain impressions on others. The second are the clues that others may spot while checking their sincerity or truthfulness. For instance, a restaurant-owner listens with a polite smile to the statements that customers *give* about how much they enjoyed their meals. At the same time, she is noting the signals the customers *give off* – how pleased they seemed while eating, whether a lot was left over and the tone of voice used to express satisfaction.

Waiters and other service-sector workers are often told to smile and be polite in their interactions with customers. In a famous study of the airline industry, Arlie Hochschild (1989) describes this as a form of 'emotional labour' (see [chapter 1](#)).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

12.2 Encountering 'dangerous persons'

Have you ever crossed to the other side of the street because you felt threatened by someone's demeanour? Elijah Anderson (1990) carried out research into this phenomenon in two adjacent urban neighbourhoods in the United States. He found that studying everyday life can shed light on how social order is constructed through the individual building blocks of micro-level interactions. Anderson was interested in understanding interactions where at least one party was viewed as threatening. He showed that the ways many black and white people interact with one another on the streets owed much to established racial stereotypes, which were linked to the economic structure of society. Once again, we see sociological work connecting micro interactions with the larger macro structures of society. Anderson began by recalling Goffman's description of how social roles and statuses come into existence in particular contexts or locations. Goffman (1990 [1959]: 13) wrote that, 'When an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or bring into play information already possessed…. Information about the individual helps to define the situation, enabling others to know in advance what he will expect of them and they may expect of him.' But what behavioural cues and signs make up the vocabulary of public interaction that produces such expectations? Anderson found that factors such as skin colour, age, clothing and jewellery are all taken as identifying markers. Similarly, how fast people move and the type of movements they make build on these to create more coherent assumptions. But the time of day and who might be expected at that time may explain and therefore 'neutralize' worries about strangers. However, where strangers are not evaluated as 'safe', the alternative image of 'predator' may take over, and people act accordingly to avoid potential problems. Anderson showed that those most likely to pass inspection do not fall into common stereotypes of the

'dangerous person'. Children and women come into this group, followed by white men, though more slowly. Black women come next, followed by black men and, finally, black male teenagers. By demonstrating that interactional tensions are linked to social status such as race, class and gender, this research shows that full understanding requires a grasp of macro- and micro-level processes. People are 'streetwise' when they develop skills such as 'the art of avoidance' to deal with fears of violence and crime.

The study shows how useful microsociology can be in highlighting how the broad institutional patterns in society operate in social life. It also adds an important empirical dimension to large-scale structural theories of social inequalities, helping to ground them in everyday experience.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Anderson's study was published in 1990. Have the categories of 'dangerous person' he described at that time now changed? Speculate on which social groups might fit this stereotype today. Explain how you would carry out a small pilot study to test out your ideas. Which research methods would prove most effective in addressing your research question?

Impression management

Interactionists such as Goffman often use concepts from the theatre in their studies. The concept of social role, for example, originated in a theatrical setting, from the 'rolled-up' scripts used by actors in ancient times. In sociology, roles are socially defined expectations that a person in a given status or social position follows. For example, to be a teacher is to hold a specific position; the teacher's role consists of acting in specified ways towards pupils, parents and other teachers. Goffman argues that social life is played out a little like actors perform on a stage, or, more accurately, on many stages, because how we act depends on the roles we are playing in particular situations and times.

People are sensitive to how they are seen by others and use many forms of impression management to shape the way others react to them. Although this may be done in calculated ways, usually it is without conscious intention. For instance, Don attends a business meeting wearing a suit and tie and is on his best behaviour, but later, when relaxing with friends at a football match, he changes to jeans and a sweatshirt and shares bawdy jokes with them. This is impression management. Indeed, Finkelstein (2002) argues that, in the West, there has long been a perceived association between physical appearance and a person's underlying character. In today's consumer societies, the fashion industry provides a shifting landscape of clothing, cosmetics and other 'props' that can be used to adorn the body, conveying a desired self-image during interactions.

As we saw above, social roles are dependent on social status, and a person's social status often differs with the social context. As a 'student' you have a certain status and are expected to act in a certain ways in seminar rooms and lecture theatres. But, as a 'son' or 'daughter', you also have a different status from 'student' and expectations differ accordingly. Likewise, as a 'friend' you have yet another different position in the social order and another set of role expectations to meet. So people have many statuses at the same time, and this group of statuses is referred to as a status set.

Sociologists also distinguish between an ascribed and an achieved status. An ascribed status is one 'assigned' on biological grounds such as 'race', sex and age. Thus, your ascribed statuses could be 'white', 'female' and 'teenager'. An achieved status is one that is earned through an individual's own effort. Your achieved statuses could be 'graduate', 'athlete' and 'employee', for example. And while we may like to believe that our achieved statuses are more important, the rest of society may not agree. In any society some statuses have priority over all others and generally determine a person's overall position. Sociologists refer to this as a master status (Hughes 1945; Becker 1963). The most common master statuses are based on gender and ethnicity, and sociologists have shown that these are among the first things people notice about each other (Omi and Winant 1994).

Classic studies 12.1 Erving Goffman – 'all the world's (a bit like) a stage'

The research problem

Very often we watch people in public situations who seem to be 'performing' or 'playing to the crowd'. If we are honest, we would probably admit that we also treat the world a little like a stage at times, putting on a show for the benefit of others. But why do we do this? And, when we do, is it really *us* – our 'real selves' – doing the performing? If 'all the world's a stage', what happens *behind the scenes* of public performances? Erving Goffman (1922–82) studied this issue in several publications and research studies, producing the most detailed accounts of people's 'performances' and backstage behaviour.

Goffman's explanation

Much of social life, Goffman suggests, can be divided into front regions and back regions. Front regions are occasions or encounters in which individuals act out formal roles; they are essentially 'on-stage performances'. *Teamwork* is often involved in creating front-region performances. Politicians in the same party may put on a convincing show of unity and friendship for television cameras, even though, privately, they might detest each other. A wife and husband may take care to conceal their arguments from their children, preserving a front of harmony, only to fight bitterly once the children are safely in bed.

The back regions are where people assemble 'props' and prepare themselves for interaction in more formal settings. Back regions resemble the backstage of a theatre or the off-camera activities of filmmaking. When they are safely behind the scenes people can relax and give vent to feelings and behaviour they keep in check on stage. Back regions permit 'profanity, open sexual remarks, elaborate griping … rough informal dress, "sloppy" sitting and standing posture, use of dialect or substandard speech, mumbling and shouting, playful aggressiveness and "kidding,"

inconsiderateness for the other in minor but potentially symbolic acts, minor self-involvement such as humming, whistling, chewing, nibbling, belching and flatulence' (Goffman 1990 [1959]: 129). Thus, a waitress may be efficient and courteous to a fault when serving customers but become loud and aggressive behind the swing doors of the kitchen.

Spencer Cahill's (1985) research team discovered what Goffman called 'performance teams', which retreated into public toilets to conceal embarrassment when their collective performance went wrong. Cahill describes a conversation between three young women in the toilets of a student centre on a university campus:

A: That was sooo embarrassing! I can't believe that just happened [*general laughter*].

B: He must think we are the biggest bunch of losers.

A: I can't believe I just screamed loud enough for everyone to hear.

C: It really wasn't all that loud. I'm sure he didn't hear you.

B: ——, we didn't see him right away, and I did try to tell you but you were so busy talking that I ...

A: I can't believe that just happened. I feel like such an asshole.

B: Don't worry 'bout it. At least he knows who you are now. Are you ready?

Defensive strategies buy teams the time to gather themselves before going out to face the 'audience' again. Goffman argued that performance teams routinely use back regions for this purpose and discuss and rehearse the performance backstage before it actually takes place.

Goffman's approach is usually described as 'dramaturgical' – based on an analogy with the theatre. However, we have to bear in mind that this is an analogy. Goffman is *not* suggesting that the social world really *is* a stage, but that, using dramaturgical analysis, we can study certain aspects of it and learn more about why people behave as they do.

Critical points

Critics of Goffman's approach make some similar points to those levelled at other microsociologies, namely that they do not have a theory of society and, despite acknowledging inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity in their accounts, they cannot explain how these developed or why they persist. The dramaturgical analogy can also be questioned. This may be a good model for studies of organizations and 'total institutions' but may not be so useful elsewhere. Similarly, Goffman's theatrical analogy works best in modern Western societies which have developed a clearer division between the public and the private realms of life (front and back regions). But in other societies this division is either less pronounced or just does not exist in the same form, hence Goffman's perspective may not have quite the same purchase on life within these societies.

Waiters usually take their breaks behind their restaurant to avoid being seen by customers and the public engaging in activities such as smoking and using bad language, which may break the spell of their on-stage performance.

Contemporary significance

Goffman's work has had a profound influence on sociology as well as on numerous scholars who have been inspired to become professional sociologists after reading his work. He is widely acknowledged to have made some of the most thoughtful and stimulating contributions to the discipline. Many sociologists today still refer to his original works for examples of how to carry out microsociology, and the concepts he developed (stigma, master status, front and back region, and so on) have become part of the very fabric of sociology across a variety of fields. His work is discussed in chapter 14, 'The Life Course', chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability', and chapter 22, 'Crime and Deviance'.

THINKING CRITICALLY

The idea of front and back regions has proved useful in many sociological studies, but, if all the world is a bit like a stage, are back regions also stages that require performances? Consider your own roles and what expectations exist in their backstage regions. In which roles or contexts can you be your 'authentic' self? What does your answer say about your personal and social identity?

Complementary roles: staging intimate examinations

Goffman's dramaturgical approach can be usefully applied to situations where 'actors' collaborate to accomplish specific outcomes. A good example is Henslin and Biggs's (1997 [1971]) study of the potentially embarrassing and delicate encounter between a female patient visiting a male gynaecologist. Henslin and Biggs analysed 12,000 to 14,000 examinations, collected by Biggs, who had trained as an obstetric nurse. In order for the interaction between patient and doctor to run smoothly, a 'dramaturgical desexualization' has to take place. That is, for the doctor to perform their highly specialized role and the patient to be comfortable and at ease during the examination, the patient's

personality is effectively screened out via a series of 'scenes', leaving just 'a body'.

Adopting the dramaturgical metaphor, the pelvic examination moves through several discrete scenes during which the parts played by the actors change as the episode unfolds. In the prologue, the person enters the waiting room preparing to assume the role of patient. When called to the consulting room she adopts the 'patient' role and the first scene opens. The doctor assumes a business-like, professional manner and treats the patient as a proper and competent person, maintaining eye contact and listening politely to what she has to say. If he decides an examination is called for, he tells her so and leaves the room – scene one closes.

At that time, a female nurse would then enter; she is an important stagehand for the main scene, soothing the patient's worries, acting as both confidante – knowing the 'things women have to put up with' – and collaborator in what is to follow. The nurse helps to transform the woman from a person to a body, supervising the patient's undressing. She takes the patient's clothes, folds them and makes sure the underwear is out of sight when the doctor returns, as most women feel this is a private matter. The nurse then guides the patient to the examining table and covers most of her body with a sheet before the physician returns.

The central scene opens with the nurse and doctor taking part. The presence of the nurse helps ensure the interaction between doctor and patient is free of sexual overtones and the examination proceeds as though the personality of the patient were absent. The drape sheet separates the genital area from the rest of the body, and, apart from specific medical queries, the doctor ignores the patient, sitting out of her line of vision. The patient collaborates in becoming a temporary non-person, not initiating conversation and keeping movement to a minimum.

In Saudi Arabia, interactions between men and women are highly regulated and intimate contact in public is forbidden. Yet in medical settings other social rules take precedence, although these are still carefully managed.

In the interval between this and the final scene, the nurse again plays the role of stagehand, helping the patient to become a full person once more. After the doctor has left the room, the two may engage in conversation. Having dressed and regroomed herself, the patient is ready to enter the final scene. The doctor re-enters the room and discusses the results, treating the patient as a complete and responsible person again. The epilogue is played out when she leaves the surgery, taking up her identity in the outside world having played her part in the management of a potentially tricky interaction.

See chapter 10, 'Health, Illness and Disability', for a discussion of functionalist ideas on doctor–patient relations and the 'sick role'.

Desexualizing the body in public places

Intimate medical examinations offer just one example of difficult social situations involving the human body. Sociological studies have recently explored the 'negotiated order' of the public swimming pool and the 'hot-tub culture', both of which present issues of the presentation of the body. In the context of public swimming pools and hot tubs, people 'present' their near naked bodies in close proximity to others, creating the risk of encounters being perceived as sexual. Hence, these interaction sites are constructed or organized as desexualized arenas, while rules and rituals have evolved which guide acceptable performances (Scott 2009, 2010). For example, swimmers try to avoid eye contact and strive to respect the varied 'disciplinary regimes' adopted by other people. It is also important that individual swimmers are aware of the rules of acceptable personal space and do not routinely breach them by encroaching on the space of others.

Over the last two decades the hot tub has become popular in many developed countries, either alongside or as a replacement for the public swimming pool. Many hotels and private homes also have an indoor or

outdoor hot tub, and tubs are now an accepted part of community life. The hot tub, though, is a smaller social site than the large public swimming pool, and the rules and 'aquatic rituals' that govern interactions can be stricter. In a study of outdoor hot tub use in Iceland, Jónsson (2010: 247) notes that 'minimal touching' is key:

> You do not greet each other with a handshake; a nod is sufficient; hot tub conversations are general and impersonal, even between regular visitors … Personal questions are not allowed. In some cases pool-goers have frequented the tubs over several years without uttering a single word. Discussions with foreigners rarely surpass the 'How-do-you-like-Iceland' barrier.

There are likely to be variations in hot-tub rituals across cultures. Where tubs have been installed in private homes and become part of 'normal' family life, public conversational and physical norms may not apply.

What both examples illustrate is the way that exposed human bodies pose problems of sexual propriety in public encounters that are dealt with by social rules, rituals and performances. Central to these interaction rituals is the maintenance of the correct personal space, or what some have referred to as the 'bubble', surrounding an individual.

Personal space

There are cultural differences in the definition of personal space. In Western culture, people usually maintain a distance of at least 3 feet when engaged in focused interaction with others; when positioned side by side, they may stand more closely together. In the Middle East, people often stand closer to one another than is thought acceptable in the West. Westerners visiting that part of the world are likely to find themselves disconcerted by this unexpected physical proximity.

Edward T. Hall (1969, 1973), who worked extensively on non-verbal communication, distinguishes four zones of personal space. *Intimate distance*, of up to 1.5 feet, is reserved for very few social contacts. Only those involved in relationships in which regular bodily touching is permitted, such as lovers or parents and children, operate within this

zone of private space. *Personal distance*, from 1.5 to 4 feet, is the normal spacing for encounters with friends and close acquaintances. Some intimacy of contact is permitted, but this tends to be strictly limited. *Social distance*, from 4 to 12 feet, is the zone usually maintained in formal settings such as interviews. The fourth zone is that of *public distance*, beyond 12 feet, preserved by those who are performing to an audience.

In ordinary interaction, the most fraught zones are those of intimate and personal distance. If these zones are invaded, people try to recapture their space. We may stare at the intruder, as if to say, 'Move away!', or elbow them aside. When people are forced into proximity closer than they deem desirable, they might create a kind of physical boundary. A reader at a crowded library desk might physically demarcate a private space by stacking books around its edges.

Gender issues also play a role here. Men have traditionally enjoyed greater freedom than women in the use of space, including movement into the personal space of women who may not be intimates or even close acquaintances. A man who guides a woman by the arm when they walk together, or who places a hand on her lower back when showing her through a door, may be doing so as a gesture of friendly care or politeness. The reverse phenomenon, however – a woman entering a man's personal space – is often construed as flirtation. New laws and standards regarding sexual harassment in many Western countries seek to protect people – men, women and, increasingly, children – from unwanted touching or contact by others in their personal space.

The rules of social interaction

Although we routinely use non-verbal cues in our own behaviour and in making sense of the behaviour of others, interactions mostly involve talk – casual verbal exchange – carried on in conversation with others. Sociologists, especially symbolic interactionists, have always accepted that language is fundamental to social life. In the late 1960s, however, an approach was devised that is specifically concerned with how people use language in the ordinary contexts of daily life.

Harold Garfinkel (discussed in 'Classic studies' 12.2) coined the term 'ethnomethodology'. Ethnomethodology is the study of 'ethno-methods' – the folk or lay methods people use to *make sense* of what others do and particularly of what they say. We all apply these methods, normally without paying conscious attention to them. Often we can make sense of what is said in conversation only if we know the social context, which does not appear in the words themselves.

See if you can understand what is going on in this simple conversation (Heritage 1984: 237):

> A: I have a fourteen-year-old son.
>
> B: Well, that's all right.
>
> A: I also have a dog.
>
> B: Oh, I'm sorry.

What if you were told that this is a conversation between a prospective tenant and a landlord? The conversation then becomes sensible: some landlords accept children but not pets. Yet, if we do not know the social context, the responses of individual B seem to bear no relation to the statements of A. *Part* of the sense is in the words but *part* is in the way that meaning emerges from the social context.

Shared understandings

The most inconsequential forms of everyday talk assume complicated shared understandings and knowledge, and meaning does not belong

to the individual but is produced in the interaction process. Meanings are entirely capable of being communicated to others and are widely shared (Dennis et al. 2013: 15). In fact, small talk is very complex, as words used in ordinary talk do not always have precise meanings, and we 'fix' what we want to say through the unstated assumptions that underlie it. If Maria asks Tom: 'What did you do yesterday?', there is no obvious answer suggested by the words in the question. A day is a long time. It would be logical for Tom to say: 'Well, at 7.16, I woke up. At 7.18, I got out of bed, went to the bathroom and started to brush my teeth. At 7.19, I turned on the shower ...' We understand the response the question calls for only by knowing Maria, what sort of activities she and Tom consider relevant, and what Tom usually does on a particular day of the week, among other things.

[Classic studies 12.2](#) Harold Garfinkel's experiments in ethnomethodology

The research problem

Misunderstandings are commonplace in social life. Sometimes they go unresolved, but they can also provoke irritation and frustration. Anyone who has been told, 'Listen when I'm talking to you', will be aware of how quickly apparently trivial misunderstandings can escalate into anger and aggression. But why do people get so upset when the minor conventions of talk are not followed? Garfinkel (1917–2011) investigated this issue with some of his students.

Garfinkel's explanation

For a smooth-running everyday existence, people must be able to take for granted certain aspects of their lives. These 'background expectancies' include the organization of ordinary conversations, such as knowing when and when not to speak, what we can assume without formally stating it, and so on. Garfinkel (1963) explored unspoken assumptions with student volunteers who set out to 'breach' the conventions of daily life. Students were asked to engage a friend or relative in conversation and to insist that casual remarks or general comments be actively pursued to make their meaning more precise. So, if someone said, 'Have a nice day', the student responded, 'Nice in what sense, exactly?' Part of one of these exchanges (cited in Heritage 1984: 80) ran as follows (E is the student volunteer, S is their husband, and they are watching television):

S: All these old movies have the same kind of old iron bedstead in them.

E: What do you mean? Do you mean all old movies or some of them, or just the ones you've seen?

S: What's the matter with you? You know what I mean.

E: I wish you would be more specific.

S: You know what I mean! Drop dead!

Why would a friend or relative get upset so quickly? Garfinkel's answer is that the stability and meaningfulness of daily life depend on the sharing of unstated assumptions about what is said and why. If we were not able to take these for granted, meaningful communication would be almost impossible. Any question or contribution to a conversation would have to be followed by a massive 'search procedure' of the sort Garfinkel's students were told to initiate, and interaction would break down. What seem at first sight to be unimportant conventions of talk turn out to be fundamental to the fabric of social life, which is why their breach is so serious.

In daily life, people sometimes deliberately feign ignorance of unstated knowledge. This may be done to rebuff others, poke fun at them, cause embarrassment or call attention to a double meaning. Consider, for example, this all too typical exchange between parent (P) and teenager (T):

P: Where are you going?

T: Out.

P: What are you going to do?

T: Nothing.

The responses of the teenager are the opposite of those of the student volunteers above. Rather than pursuing enquiries where this is not normally done, the teenager provides no appropriate answers at all – essentially saying, 'Mind your own business!'

The first question might elicit a different response from another person in another context:

A: Where are you going?

B: I'm going quietly round the bend.

B deliberately misreads A's question in order ironically to convey worry or frustration. Comedy and jokes thrive on such deliberate misunderstandings of the unstated assumptions involved in talk.

There is nothing threatening about this as long as the parties concerned recognize that the intent is to provoke laughter.

By delving into the everyday world, Garfinkel shows that the normal, smooth-running social order that other sociologists simply take for granted is in fact a social process of interaction that must be continually reproduced every day. Social order is hard work! However, in his 'breaching experiments', Garfinkel was also able to demonstrate just how robust the fabric of daily life is. Students were able to explain and apologize to their friends and families once the experiment was over, but what might have happened had they carried on in such pedantic and uncooperative ways? Would they have been referred to a doctor or sent to a psychiatrist as suffering from mental illness? Social reality may be socially constructed, but it is a construction that is impossible to ignore.

Critical points

Given that ethnomethodology set out to criticize mainstream sociology and is usually seen as an alternative to it, it is unsurprising that it has been subject to much criticism. We can only note the most important points. First, ethnomethodology seeks to understand the world from the viewpoint of 'ordinary actors'. While this may bring about useful insights, critics argue that it leaves ethnomethodological findings open to the charge of subjectivism – they apply only to the particular subjects being studied. Second, the focus on micro-level order and disorder leaves ethnomethodology remarkably detached from the key structural determinants affecting people's life chances, such as gender, race/ethnicity and social class. Ethnomethodology's aversion to social structural analysis and general theories of society seems to leave its studies cast adrift from crucial questions about power and the structuring of social life. Finally, ethnomethodology does not look for the causes of social phenomena but seeks to describe how they are experienced and made sense of. Again, many sociologists see this lack of causal explanation as a major problem which essentially rules out the idea that the study of social life could ever be 'scientific'.

Contemporary significance

Ethnomethodology is an important approach to the study of daily life and social interaction which is usually seen alongside other microsociologies, such as phenomenology and symbolic interactionism. Sociologists who are interested in large-scale social structures, power relations, the international system of nation-states and long-term socio-historical change will always find ethnomethodology disappointing. But, taken on its own terms, this approach has produced much insightful work showing how people constitute, reproduce and make sense of their world.

Interactional vandalism

We have seen that conversations are one of the main ways in which our daily lives are maintained in a stable and coherent manner. We feel most comfortable when the tacit conventions of small talk are adhered to, but when they are breached we can feel threatened, confused and insecure. In most everyday talk, conversants are carefully attuned to the cues given by others, such as changes in intonation, slight pauses or gestures, in order to facilitate smooth conversation. By being mutually aware, conversants 'cooperate' in opening and closing interactions and in taking turns to speak. Interactions in which one party is conversationally 'uncooperative' can give rise to tensions.

Garfinkel's students intentionally created tense situations by undermining conversational rules as part of their sociological experiments. But what about real-world situations in which people 'make trouble' through conversational practices? One 1990s American study investigated verbal interchanges between pedestrians and street people in New York City to understand why passers-by find such interactions problematic. The researchers used conversation analysis to compare a selection of street interchanges with samples of everyday talk. Conversation analysis is a methodology that examines all facets of a conversation for meaning – from the smallest filler words (such as 'er', 'um' and 'ah') to the precise timing of interchanges, including pauses, interruptions and overlaps.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

12.3 Why are other people so rude?

We have all come across people we consider to be 'rude'. By identifying some people as rude we inevitably compare them to ourselves – the non-rude folks. But are there really people who are rude by nature? Susie Scott (2015: 44–8) recounts the single case of an encounter in 2013 between a shopper and a cashier in the UK that received much media attention.

A customer arrived at the checkout of a supermarket in south-east London and continued to talk on her mobile phone. The cashier interpreted this behaviour as rude and refused to serve her, and the ensuing row made media headlines. Scott argues that the cashier's interpretation was that she was a participant in a focused encounter and, by continuing her phone conversation, the customer failed to acknowledge her, instead treating her as a 'nonperson'. Yet the customer also believed that *she* held the moral high ground, as the cashier had been rude to her by refusing to perform the role and serve her. The encounter illustrates a general point that it is through breaches of the interaction order that the rules of interaction become visible at all. But who was the 'rude person' in this exchange?

From an interactionist perspective, we can better understand this situation if we see 'rudeness' as an emergent property of social situations, not as a personal characteristic of certain individuals. Rudeness can be reformulated as a type of incivility that arises out of interactions in which actors or audiences define it as such. As Scott (2015: 46) says, 'Nobody likes to think of themselves as a rude person ... and it is much easier to regard ourselves as upholders of social morality, whilst being quick to indignantly ascribe rudeness to others.' In this sense we all have the capacity to be rude, and to have our actions defined as 'rude' by others, in spite of our strongly held view that we are just not 'rude people'.

The rules of mobile phone use during public performances such as theatre plays, if others aren't disturbed, are still evolving, though stage actors are increasingly calling out audience members for 'rudeness' when messaging during performances.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Think of a time when you or someone you know were described as being rude by other people, perhaps while queueing, travelling or in conversation with friends. Reconstruct the development of that encounter and explain why the behaviour may have been perceived as rude. Did you consider that it was rudeness at the time? With hindsight, do you now believe that it was rude? Is rudeness functional for social life, and, if so, how?

The study looked at interactions between black men – many of whom were homeless, alcoholic or drug addicts – and white women who passed by on the street. The men tried to initiate conversations with passing women by calling out or paying them compliments or asking

them questions. But something 'goes wrong' in these attempted conversations, because the women rarely responded. The text below is an attempt by 'Mudrick', a black man in his late fifties, to engage women in conversation (Duneier and Molotch 1999: 1273–4):

[Mudrick] begins this interaction as a white woman (who looks about 25 years old) approaches at a steady pace:

1. MUDRICK: I love you baby.
   She crosses her arms and quickens her walk, ignoring the comment.

2. MUDRICK: Marry me.
   Next, it is two white women, also probably in their mid-twenties:

3. MUDRICK: Hi girls, you all look very nice today. You have some money? Buy some books.
   They ignore him. Next, it is a young black woman:

4. MUDRICK: Hey pretty. Hey pretty.
   She keeps walking without acknowledging him.

5. MUDRICK: 'Scuse me. 'Scuse me. I know you hear me.
   Then he addresses a white woman in her thirties:

6. MUDRICK: I'm watching you. You look nice, you know.
   She ignores him.

Negotiating smooth 'openings' and 'closings' to conversations is a fundamental requirement for urban civility, but when women resisted the men's attempts at opening conversations, the men ignored them and persisted. Similarly, if the men succeeded in opening a conversation, they often refused to respond to cues from the women to close it, as happens here:

1. MUDRICK: Hey pretty.

2. WOMAN: Hi how you doin'.

3. MUDRICK: You alright?

4. MUDRICK: You look very nice you know. I like how you have your hair pinned.

5. MUDRICK: You married?

6. WOMAN: Yeah.

7. MUDRICK: Huh?

8. WOMAN: Yeah.

9. MUDRICK: Where the rings at?

10. WOMAN: I have it home.

11. MUDRICK: Y'have it home?

12. WOMAN: Yeah.

13. MUDRICK: Can I get your name?

14. MUDRICK: My name is Mudrick, what's yours?
    She does not answer and walks on.
    (Duneier and Molotch 1999: 1274)

In this instance, Mudrick made nine out of the fourteen utterances in the interaction to initiate the conversation and elicit further responses from the woman. From the transcript it is evident that the woman is not interested in talking, but, when conversation analysis is applied to the tape recording, her reluctance becomes even clearer. She delays all her responses and, when she does respond, Mudrick replies immediately, his comments sometimes overlapping hers. Timing in conversations is a precise indicator; delaying a response by just a fraction of a second is adequate to signal a desire to change the course of a conversation. By ignoring the tacit rules, Mudrick was 'technically rude'. In return, the woman was also 'technically rude' in ignoring his repeated attempts to engage her in talk, and it is this aspect that made the interactions problematic for passers-by. When standard cues for opening and closing conversations are not adhered to, people can feel profoundly insecure.

The term interactional vandalism describes cases like these, in which a subordinate person breaks the tacit rules of interaction that are of value to the more powerful (Duneier and Molotch 1999). The men on the street often conformed to norms of speech in their interactions with one another, local shopkeepers, the police, relatives and acquaintances. But, when they chose to, they subverted the conventions, leaving passers-by disoriented and unable to articulate what had happened.

This study of interactional vandalism is another example of the link between micro-level interactions and forces operating at the macro level. To the black men on the street, the white women who ignored them were distant and bereft of sympathy and hence legitimate 'targets'. The women often took the men's behaviour as proof that they were indeed dangerous and best avoided. Interactional vandalism is closely tied in with overarching class, gender and racial structures. The fear and anxiety generated in such interactions help to constitute the outside statuses and forces that, in turn, influence the interactions themselves.

Response cries

Some kinds of utterance are not really 'talk' but muttered exclamations, or what Goffman (1981) calls response cries. For instance, when Marsha exclaims, 'Oops!', after knocking over a glass of water, 'Oops!' seems to be an uninteresting reflex response to a mishap, rather like blinking your eye when a person moves a hand sharply towards your face. But the fact that people do not usually make the exclamation when they are alone shows it is not just a reflex. 'Oops!' is a response cry normally directed towards other people. The exclamation demonstrates to others that the lapse is minor and momentary, not something that should cast doubt on Marsha's command of her actions.

'Oops!' is used for minor failures, not major accidents or calamities, which demonstrates that it is part of our controlled management of the details of social life. Moreover, the exclamation may be used by someone observing Marsha rather than Marsha herself. 'Oops!' is normally a curt sound, but the 'oo' may be prolonged in some situations. Someone might extend the sound to cover a critical moment when performing a task. A parent may utter an extended 'Oops!' or 'Oopsadaisy!' when playfully tossing a child in the air. The sound covers that brief phase when the child might feel a loss of control, reassuring them and at the same time developing their understanding of response cries.

This may all sound contrived and exaggerated. Surely we do not pay as much attention to what we say as this example suggests? Of course not,

at least not on a conscious level. But we all take for granted this immensely complicated, continuous control of our appearance and actions. In interactions we are never just 'present'. Others expect, as we expect of them, that we will display what Goffman calls 'controlled alertness' – a demonstration to others that we are competent in the routines of daily life.

The strength of the tacit rules of interaction is so strong that innocent deviations from the rules respecting personal space can be surprisingly embarrassing.

Interaction in time and space

The previous section introduced some important aspects of the implicit rules pervading routine, everyday interactions. However, all our actions are distributed in time and space, and all interaction is situated, occurring in a particular place and time. Kim (2012) used participant observation to study the behaviour of people riding Greyhound buses in the USA and spending time in bus terminals over a two-year period. In particular, she sought to explain why and how people avoid interacting with others in these places.

The longer Greyhound journeys can last anywhere between eight and seventy-two hours, and passengers tend to be strangers. Interactions do occur, but these are brief as, for most, strangers are suspect and time is best spent looking after belongings and trying to put off others from taking the adjoining seat. Travellers adopt all sorts of behaviour to appear busy or uninterested – using mobile phones, checking bags, exploring the contents of wallets, staring out of windows, and sleeping or pretending to sleep. Kim calls this intentional avoidance of interaction 'non-social transient behaviour'. While civil inattention acknowledges and respects the presence of others, non-social transient behaviour aims at 'invisibility' and does not respect or acknowledge the presence of others. Nonetheless, the actors are still engaged in giving a performance, one which effectively says to others, 'Leave me alone' or 'I don't want to be bothered'.

Kim argues that these performances occur primarily in enclosed spaces where people are forced to spend long periods of time together. However, they also take place in other non-social transient spaces perceived as potentially dangerous, such as nightclubs, pop concerts, sports venues and high-crime areas. One reason why people adopt non-social transient behaviour on long bus journeys is to protect themselves from possible thefts and physical attack. It is uncommon, for instance, for passengers to ask others to 'keep an eye on' their bags, as fellow passengers are also potentially suspect. A second reason is the expectation of delays and subsequent aggravation. Delays themselves do not routinely lead to complaints but, rather, to intensified disengagement and silence. Finally, passengers experience physical and psychological exhaustion on such long trips, and the rule is to keep conversations to a minimum and not to bother others unnecessarily. Kim's (2012: 9) central argument is that, in non-social transient spaces, there exists a set of norms and behavioural rules which new commuters learn in order to 'become non-social'.

The internet is another good example of how closely forms of social life are bound up with the control of space and time, making it possible for us, in any corner of the world, to interact with people we never see or meet. Such technological change 'rearranges' space – we can interact with anyone without moving. It also alters our experience of time,

because communication is almost immediate. Until the advent of the internet, most communication across space required a long duration of time. If a letter was sent abroad, there was a time gap while the letter was carried by ship, train, truck or plane to its destination. People do still write letters by hand, but instantaneous communication has become basic to the social world, and we look at this developing environment next.

Interaction norms for the digital age

The rapid growth and use of information communications technology (ICT) is both startling and a genuinely global phenomenon, though there are significant disparities between the developed and some developing countries (see chapter 19, 'The Media', for more on this subject). By the end of 2018, an estimated 3.9 billion people used the internet, over half of the global population, and 60 per cent accessed the internet at home (ITU 2018: 2). In 2017 almost everyone in the world had access to a mobile network signal, and mobile broadband subscriptions reached in excess of 4 billion. Young people aged fifteen to twenty-four lead internet adoption and usage, and around 830 million were online in 2017 (ITU 2017). What will be the impact of these digital technologies on the life of individuals and societies?

Interaction and communication at a distance

ICT devices are spreading rapidly and have increasingly been integrated into people's everyday routines, both at home and at work (Kraut et al. 2006).This is the conclusion from a 2007 MTV Networks/Nickelodeon survey of 18,000 young people aged eight to twenty-four across sixteen countries, including China, Japan, the UK, the USA, Canada and Mexico. The survey found that 'Young people don't see "tech" as a separate entity – it's an organic part of their lives…. Talking to them about the role of technology in their lifestyle would be like talking to kids in the 1980s about the role the park swing or the telephone played in their social lives – it's invisible' (Reuters 2007).

But how do people communicate and interact with each other using smartphones, the internet, email and social media sites? Chambers (2006) investigated the thesis that the fairly stable and fixed ties of family, neighbourly relations and community were giving way to more voluntaristic, fluid ties (Putnam 2000). She concluded that new patterns of association and social bonds are emerging based around ideals of 'friendship', many of which are sustained through ICT networks. She also argues that other forms are forged through new

social identities among previously marginalized groups, such as those within 'queer communities', resulting in safe spaces for the exploration of 'self' and identities. Yet ICTs also bring with them potentially new problems, such as cyberbullying and financial fraud.

Chambers notes that, in spite of their positive aspects, social media may not provide an adequate basis for ensuring relationships of care and caring, most of which do need regular face-to-face contact and long-term commitment. Many schools and parents are also concerned about social networking and smartphones in relation to fears about online grooming and the abuse of children by adults. Such fears are not entirely unfounded. One social networking site, MySpace, admitted in 2007 that it had found more than 29,000 registered sex offenders among its 180 million members worldwide (Johnson 2007). Although this is a very small proportion of the overall membership, it is clear that the fast-changing and relatively anonymous online environment presents new problems.

> Friendship and relationships are discussed in more detail in [chapter 15](), 'Families and Intimate Relationships'.

Many of today's affiliations are created through the internet or other forms of mobile communication, but how will these trends affect the quality of social relationships? For almost all of human history, people interacted face to face with others who were close at hand. Although letters, the telegraph and telephone have all been around for some time, the internet enables 'interaction at a distance' in much more transformative ways. For instance, Skype enables (almost) real-time 'face-to-face' interactions between people who may be thousands of miles apart. The digital revolution could provide a renewed sense of sociality and personal intimacy for some, but it could also spell isolation and social distance for others. What seems clear is that people

are already fitting digital media into their everyday routines alongside existing face-to-face relationships.

Netiquette or 'cybermanners'

As we have seen, online communication and interactions present both dangers and opportunities, and sociological studies explore the developing contours of cyberspace. Some have suggested that, rather than seeing online life as a distinct realm of human experience, it may be more accurate to view it as an extension of the physical social world. For instance, on social media sites, most people interact mainly with friends, relations and people they already know from face-to-face contact (Holmes 2011). Other Facebook 'friends' or 'followers' on Twitter are likely to be kept at a distance. As Baym (2015: 6) argues, we should not see 'cyberspace' as an inauthentic realm set apart from the authentic 'real world' of face-to-face or body-to-body interaction, because 'online and offline flow together in the life-worlds of contemporary relationships.'

With the advent of the 'second generation' of more interactive online services – often referred to as 'Web 2.0' – more people can share information and actually contribute to web-based content. One prominent and widely used example of this is the online encyclopaedia *Wikipedia*, which allows users to add content, to debate the veracity of entries with others, and effectively to become co-authors. The worldwide web can also be viewed on many more mobile internet devices, including mobile phones, laptop computers and tablets, thus integrating the internet into more aspects of daily life (Beer and Burrows 2007; see chapter 19, 'The Media'). There is a blurring of the boundary between the private and the public as, for instance, people 'tweet' about their everyday activities and movements and include private details such as their location, gender, relationship status, and so on, in their social media profiles. Online communication has led to the emergence of norms and rules governing interactions and exchanges – often described as netiquette – and there are now many sources of information on how people *should* behave in their online communications (Chiles 2013).

Etiquette guides to interaction on social media advise that, although these are similar to 'real life', it is important to appreciate that anyone can become a 'friend'. Some guides suggest 'friending' only those people one already knows, while others argue that it is good to accept strangers, who can then be dropped or 'defriended' later if necessary. One etiquette guide to Facebook (Weinberg 2008) advises: 'don't add users as "friends" without proper introductions, be honest about your real identity and don't publicize a private conversation on a "wall" (publicly open) post.' The same guide reminds us to 'Think about the consequences of your engagement on any social site … Consider how your comments would be perceived before you actually post them, and think about logic above emotion at all times.' Another guide tells Twitter users, 'It is not required for you to follow people who have chosen to follow you (although doing so in return can be seen as a polite gesture). However, it is important to acknowledge them when they reply to or retweet one of your public services' (Steinberg and Brown 2013).

Given the nature of web-based services, which are open to user-driven change, online manners codes are likely to continue developing along with the technology. At present, netiquette appears to be based largely on attempts to translate existing norms of behaviour and codes of manners into a format which is appropriate online, rather than creating an entirely novel system. For example, a survey of netiquette advice by Holmes (2011) found that, as in 'the real world', social status differences between employee and employer or teachers and students were seen as problematic and potentially embarrassing. Similarly, social divisions of class and ethnicity were seen as needing careful handling.

If online etiquette is a variant of social etiquette, then mainstream sociological theories and concepts should still be useful. For instance, the concept of 'role conflict' helps to makes sense of this situation as users attempt to manage their different roles in relation to the different 'faces' they present to others. This becomes increasingly difficult on social media, where information is potentially open to all of these various audiences at the same time. How many workers would be comfortable to find that their boss was a Facebook 'friend' or Twitter

'follower', for example? Keeping separate the various roles an individual plays and the faces they present seems to be becoming more complex. This conclusion is consistent with the view that the internet is an extension and part of the social world, not a clean break from it. This is evident from a brief look at how 'trust' is built and managed online.

Building trust online

Many everyday transactions, such as buying groceries, making a bank deposit or paying a utility bill, bring us into *indirect contact* with strangers. Anyone who has phoned a bank and been put through to an anonymous call centre thousands of miles away has experienced this phenomenon. Now that email, text messaging, instant messaging, online communities, chatrooms and social media have become widely integrated into everyday life, there is a growing interest in understanding their impact and the norms of online conduct that are emerging (Baym 2015).

There has long been a polarization in debates on the possibilities and dangers of the internet. For sceptics, internet communication, often referred to as computer mediated communication (CMC), generates new problems that are just not found in face-to-face social interactions. As Katz et al. (2001: 407) put it: 'To type is not to be human, to be in cyberspace is not to be real; all is pretence and alienation, a poor substitute for the real thing.' In particular, proponents of this view argue that CMC technology is unable to prevent users from hiding behind false identities, which allow trickery, fraud, bullying, manipulation, emotional swindles and the sexual grooming of children. The result is the gradual erosion of mutual trust, not only in online environments but spreading into the wider society too. Turkle (2017: 11–12) argues that online communication appears to promote connectedness, but this may be illusory: 'After an evening of avatar to avatar talk in a networked game, we feel, at one moment, in possession of a full social life and, in the next, curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with strangers.' Online environments lead to reduced expectations of the people with whom we connect and, consequently, denuded relations in the material social world.

On the other hand, internet enthusiasts argue that online interaction has some advantages over conventional forms. Physical co-presence may enable the display of a wider range of emotions and subtle changes of meaning, but it also conveys information about the speaker's age, gender, ethnicity and social position that may be used to stigmatize and discriminate. Electronic communication masks most or all of these identifying markers, ensuring that attention focuses strictly on the content of the message. This can be a great advantage for minority ethnic groups, women and other traditionally disadvantaged groups whose opinions have been devalued in public situations (Locke and Pascoe 2000).

Optimists argue that internet users also tend to communicate with others via conventional means, such as phone or face to face, more than do non-users. Hence, far from increasing social isolation and destroying trust, email, blogging, chatrooms and social media present new opportunities for communication and friendship building. Electronic interactions can be experienced as liberating and empowering, since people can create online identities and speak more freely than they would elsewhere (Katz et al. 2001).

Global society 12.1 The creation and maintenance of 'e-trust'

Public debate on internet security has tended to focus on issues of online banking fraud, the use of false identities, and the problems associated with children using chatrooms that may be monitored by predatory paedophiles. Such worries make people fearful and erode trust in the online environment. In successful social interactions of all kinds, trust is a key component. According to Cook and her colleagues (2009: 1), 'Trust facilitates social interaction. When it exists, it strengthens cooperation, provides the basis for risk-taking, and grants latitude to the parties involved. When it does not exist, various mechanisms are required to protect against exploitation.' This is particularly evident in transactions between people who are not co-present. Such indirect and geographically distant transactions are potentially problematic because none of the usual gestures, body language or non-verbal cues is in play, which deprives both parties of crucial elements by which each can satisfy themselves as to the sincerity of the other party.

The largest and most well-established internet auction house is eBay. It is difficult to establish how many people earn most of their income from eBay, but in 2006 it was estimated that some 165,000 Americans alone were making a living primarily from selling on the site (Epley et al. 2006). Launched in 1995, eBay quickly attracted more than 100 million people around the world, even though it can offer no guarantees for any goods sold. Buyers and sellers take on all the risks. Yet though we might expect this arrangement to be open to large-scale fraud and deceit, in fact the default rate for transactions on eBay is remarkably small.

One reason for this is eBay's 'reputation management system', which effectively replaces face-to-face interactional cues (Kollock 1999; Resnick et al. 2006). The eBay system asks buyers and sellers to rate each other – positive, negative or neutral, though short comments can also be added. Online reputation management systems have been described as the cyber equivalent of 'gossip' in

social life, as people's views of one another are both encouraged and widely shared. But, unlike gossip, which tends to be localized and restricted within community boundaries, online systems potentially involve millions of people across the world, and the impact of gaining a bad reputation can be serious for both traders and buyers (Lev-On 2009).

Over time, reputations are established which means eBay users are able to compare and contrast traders in order to minimize the risks they take online. In sum, e-trust in the online eBay auction house, and others which use similar systems, is produced through a form of community self-policing. However, from a trader's perspective, the feedback system also offers an online version of impression management and self-presentation.

Conclusion: a need or no need for proximity?

Despite the rise in indirect communication, it seems that humans still value direct contact. People in business continue to fly around the world to attend meetings when it would be much cheaper, more efficient and more environmentally friendly to use conference calls, Skype or video links. Family members could arrange 'virtual' reunions or holiday gatherings using electronic real-time communications, but would they really match the warmth and intimacy of face-to-face celebrations? The Covid-19 pandemic of 2019–20 was notable for the way that people under severe forms of physical and geographical restrictions made use of online communications to maintain social contact with friends and family. Email, social media, video conferencing apps and lots more enabled people to stay in touch during a very difficult and extended period of time. Yet, for most people, digital forms of communication could not match physical contact. People reported a longing to be able to hug their grandchildren, congregate together in social groups, and even to do something as simple as shake hands.

Boden and Molotch (1994) studied what they call the compulsion to proximity: the need of individuals to meet with one another in situations of co-presence. People prefer this, they suggest, because co-presence supplies much richer information about other people's sincerity than any form of electronic communication. Only by being in the physical presence of others do we feel able to learn what is 'really' going on. Similarly, Jamieson (2013: 20) cautions against believing that web-based activity will replace face-to-face relations. She argues that the internet has enabled the existing commercial sex industry – such as prostitution and pornography – to expand, noting that 'there are no signs of digitally mediated forms of engagement with sex threatening to reshape or replace "skin on skin" sexual relationships.' Urry (2003) argues that, in spite of young people today having grown up with the internet and digital technology as part of their daily lives, even this generation continues to seek out physical co-presence in global protest

sites, holiday experiences, volunteer camps and large, open-air music concerts.

Yet, perhaps this conclusion is premature given the relatively recent creation of online environments or 'worlds', which are still developing. The internet has yet to reach its full potential for interaction across time and space, but one glimpse into the future is *Second Life*, a 3D virtual world which claims more than 20 million registered users. However, some estimates suggest only around 600,000 of these are active 'residents'. On *Second Life* people create their own virtual body or 'avatar' through which they then live out a 'second life' online. This ability to create an identity from scratch offers a much broader palette for the construction of online identities than the props and materials available from the fashion industry and bodily transformations in the physical world.

One aspect of this virtual world is that users can play their own music, perform their own gigs, stage concerts or attend those held by others. Some see this as a good way of 'breaking' new musical acts that may find it difficult to get noticed in conventional ways. Comparing virtual worlds and their events with those in the 'real world', it is likely that the former will always be seen as pale imitations, lacking the physical reality, smells and sounds of real-world rock concerts, for example. But it is not too fanciful to imagine that, as virtual headsets develop and virtual reality becomes ever more immersive, some of these disadvantages may be overcome. On the other hand, there are some distinct advantages to virtual environments that avoid the physicality of real-world events. Beer and Geesin (2009: 124) argue that, in future:

> The draw may not be the physicality of the experience of the gig but of attending events as the imagined avatar rocking-out with fellow avatars – moshing, pogoing or foot-tapping. It may be that rather than a compulsion to proximity these events instead reveal an opportunity to attend live musical happenings without the risks and discomforts of 'being there' at a live musical event – the crushing and pushing, the flailing hands, elbows and feet, the smell, crowd surfers, the unwanted physical contact, the unwelcome advances, the damp, the dirt, and, especially, the heat.
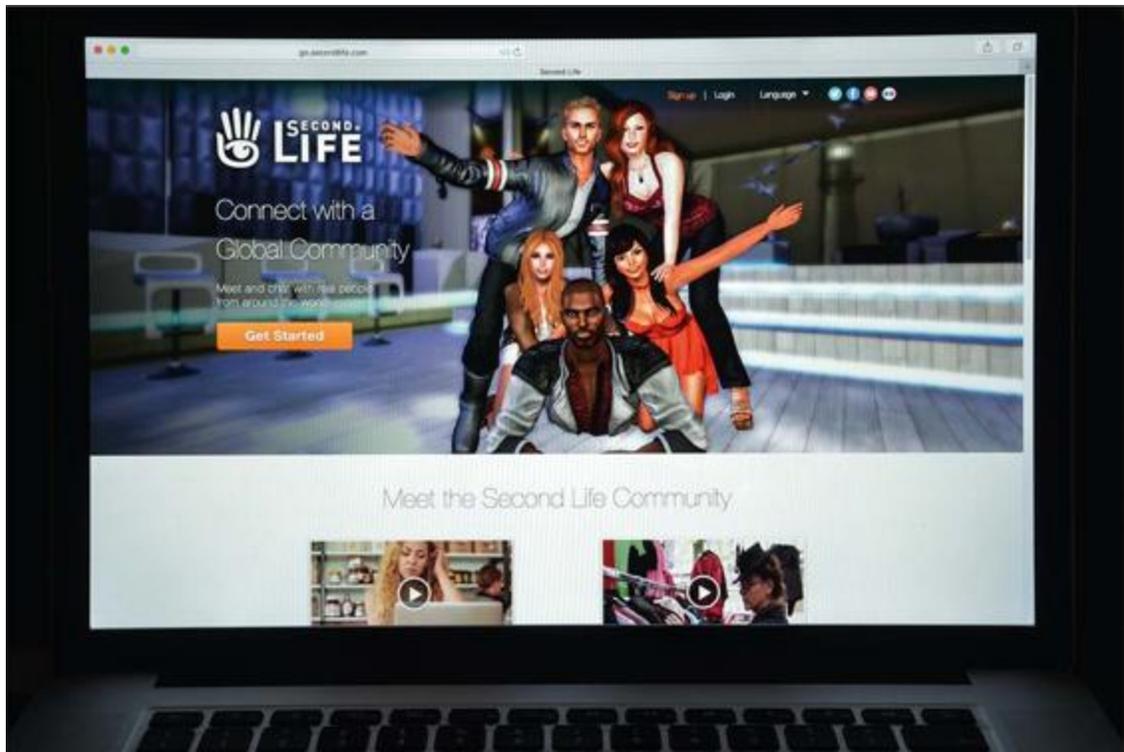
Living a 'second life' through an online avatar offers people the opportunity to develop an alternative self to their embodied version. However, conventional social norms and rituals often transfer seamlessly into virtual worlds.

Testing whether existing microsociological concepts and theories that have proved so fruitful in analysing face-to-face interactions are capable of understanding the interactions between humans and their avatar communities in online virtual worlds is an intriguing research prospect for sociologists. And as Johnson (2010) argues, 'You might scoff at the idea of being an avatar, and strolling through virtual daisies. But, whether you participate or not, know that Second Life and other virtual communities are impacting our lives, and changing the way we understand the role of the media.'

❓ **Chapter review**

1. 'The study of micro-level interactions is the province of psychology, not sociology.' Explain why the micro level is important for a rounded understanding of social life.

2. With examples, explain what is meant by 'everyday sexism'.

3. Non-verbal communication (NVC) includes body language. Provide some instances of gendered NVC.

4. Provide a brief definition of ethnomethodology. Is ethnomethodology a form of microsociology or something else entirely?

5. To what extent does the social context of everyday conversations contribute to the meaning of speech? Provide some examples from the chapter to illustrate your answer.

6. Explain Goffman's 'dramaturgical analogy', referring to his concepts of the stage, props, front and back regions, and 'performance'.

7. 'The digital revolution is antithetical to friendship and community.' How might we argue against this assertion in relation to social media use?

8. What is cyberbullying and how does it differ from traditional bullying? How could authorities tackle it more effectively?

9. List some of the rules and norms of netiquette as they apply to social media. What methods do people use when they engage in impression management online?

🔍 Research in practice

Anti-abortion activism is usually associated with religious groups in the USA, particularly organized protests outside medical centres. However, in recent years there has been anti-abortion activism outside clinics in the UK, albeit on a smaller scale than in America. The focus on violent acts and noisy demonstrations in the USA tends to mask other forms of activism, including that of simply being there. The actions of activists who attend clinics in the UK to 'bear witness' by observing, but who do not engage in shouting or overt protest, may also have a significant effect on women seeking to terminate a pregnancy.

This issue is brought into focus in the article below, which approaches the issue by drawing on the interactionist ideas of Goffman. Read the piece and answer the questions that follow.

> Lowe, P., and Hayes, G. (2019) 'Anti-Abortion Clinic Activism, Civil Inattention and the Problem of Gendered Harassment', *Sociology*, 53(2): 330–46; https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/0038038518762 075.

1. This research adopted a mixed-methods approach. Which methods were used here?

2. What cultural and political differences do the authors identify between the USA and the UK in relation to attitudes towards abortion?

3. The article argues that UK anti-abortion activism is essentially similar to 'street accosting'. In what ways is this so?

4. What impact did the observed activism have on women who attended the clinics? In particular, how do Goffman's concepts of civil inattention and focused/unfocused interaction help us to understand the situation?

5. Do you agree with the authors that the paper provides evidence supporting the introduction of 'buffer zones' to protect women

from harassment? What impact might such a policy have on the tactics of anti-abortion activists?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Many interactionist accounts of social life appear particularly persuasive because they are understandable within people's own life experience. For example, Goffman's work on impression management and the presentation of self strikes a chord precisely because we are able to recognize these in our own behaviour. Yet a large amount of sociological research has focused on examining *macrosocial* structures, such as class, ethnicity and gender, socio-historical change and the impact of 'social forces', on the individual.

Work through this chapter from the start up to the heading 'Interaction norms for the digital age' (p. 495), noting wherever macrosocial phenomena and social structures are implied, assumed or referred to in the discussion. Do interactionist sociologies fail satisfactorily to explain the emergence and persistence of structured social divisions? How have other sociological perspectives accounted for social class, ethnic and gender divisions? How fair is the criticism that interactionism is good at *describing* aspects of social life but is not capable of properly *explaining* it?

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Are our online 'friendships' really the same as those we forge through face-to-face interactions? In the digital age, with the ubiquity of social media contacts and communication, what does friendship look like anyway? One interesting experiment is that of the American visual artist Tanja Hollander, who set out in 2011 to meet with and photograph all of her 626 social media 'friends'. The project took around five years to complete.

Hollander exhibited some of the work in 2017 in a multimedia exhibition, 'Are You Really My Friend?'. Her website displays some of the photographs from this project: http://areyoureallymyfriend.com/portraits.html, together with other materials collected during her travels: http://areyoureallymyfriend.com/. A secondary account of the project can be found at www.pressherald.com/2017/01/29/tanja-hollander-finds-answers-to-are-you-really-my-friend/. Add your own research about Hollander's ideas and artwork.

1. Early in the project, Hollander suggested that 'Facebook isn't a substitute for real relationships but it's a way to start connections' (cited in O'Neill 2012). Is this really the case? Construct an argument that social media friendships are every bit as 'real' as those in face-to-face relationships.

2. Why might it be argued that the interaction between the artist and her 'friends' may have militated against any objective findings? As this is an artistic work and not social science, does that matter? Should we expect to learn something different about friendship from works of art?

Further reading

For an introductory text covering all of the theories and issues in this chapter, Susie Scott's (2009) *Making Sense of Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Polity) is excellent, as is Brian Roberts's (2006) *Micro Social Theory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan). Both are well written and reliable introductions. Particular perspectives can be pursued further in *Encountering the Everyday: An Introduction to the Sociologies of the Unnoticed* (2008), edited by Michael Hviid Jacobsen (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan).

For the work of Garfinkel and others, you might try David Francis and Stephen Hester's (2004) *An Invitation to Ethnomethodology: Language, Society and Interaction* (London: Sage). Martyn Hammersley's (2018) *The Radicalism of Ethnomethodology: An Assessment of Sources and Principles* (Manchester: Manchester University Press) is commendably well written and very clear, comparing Garfinkel's ideas to those of Simmel and Goffman. Goffman's approach is best read in his own book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1990 [1959]), which is a brilliant example of interactionist sociology. Among many secondary accounts of Goffman's work are Greg Smith's (2006) *Erving Goffman* (London: Routledge) and Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Søren Kristiansen's (2014) *The Social Thought of Erving Goffman* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage). Both are lively discussions.

For a comprehensive introduction to online communication and interaction, see Nancy K. Baym's (2015) *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity) or Crispin Thurlow, Laura Lengel and Alice Tomic's (2004) *Computer Mediated Communication: An Introduction to Social Interaction Online* (London: Sage), which is a hands-on guide to CMC.

For a collection of original readings on interaction and communication, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ **Internet links**

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Exploring Nonverbal Communication – an introduction to NVC with a self-test of reading examples:
https://nonverbal.ucsc.edu/

The Everyday Sexism Project – a site dedicated to cataloguing real-world experiences of sexism:
https://everydaysexism.com/

Society for the Study of Symbolic Interaction – exactly what it says, with a journal and many resources:
https://symbolicinteraction.org/

Website with information on the life and work of Erving Goffman:
http://people.brandeis.edu/~teuber/goffmanbio.html

Howard Becker's website, which covers his own work and some helpful links too:
http://howardsbecker.com/

International Institute for Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis – lots of resources and links: https://iiemca.com/

CHAPTER 13
CITIES AND URBAN LIFE

CONTENTS

Songdo International Business District is a planned 'new city' of the twenty-first century, built around Incheon Airport.

Songdo in South Korea is a 'new' city, but that does not just mean 'recently completed'. Songdo has been designed from the outset as a new type of smart city promising a high-tech vision of the sustainable city of the future. Advocates of smart cities argue that, with an overarching master plan, it is possible to design out many of the chronic problems of traditional cities, such as pollution, overcrowding and traffic congestion, making extensive use of digital technologies, robotics, artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things. As a result, Songdo offers a different experience of urban life:

a place where the garbage is automatically sucked away through underground pipes, where lampposts are always watching you, and where your apartment block knows to send the elevator down to greet you when it detects the arrival of your car. Sensors in every street track traffic flow and send alerts to your phone when it's going to snow, while you can monitor the children's playground on TV from the comfort of your sofa. (Wainwright 2019)

Who would want even to escape to the country when the smart city holds out such an appealing prospect for the good life?

See chapter 19, 'The Media', for a discussion of digital technology and the Internet of Things.

Sarah Moser of McGill University, Canada, has monitored the planning and development of around 120 new cities since 2000. She says that 'Neoliberalism and deregulation have created a wild west atmosphere that facilitates the circulation of footloose capital globally' (cited in Shepard 2019). The range of new cities include Putrajaya and Forest City in Malaysia, Eko Atlantic off the coast of Nigeria, New Cairo in Egypt, Yachay City of Knowledge in Ecuador, Dompak in Indonesia, Rawabi in Palestine, Casa-Anfa and Benguerir Green City in Morocco and Neom in Saudi Arabia. Neom is planned as a high-tech entity based on biotechnology industries, media and renewables that will cost at least $500 billion to complete. Concerns have been expressed about the level of debt with which some economies in the Global South may be faced as a result of the rush for new-build cities.

Given that the global population continues to rise and that a larger proportion of people will live in urban regions, it seems logical to build more cities and large urban settlements. Rather than trying to develop and change existing cities to accommodate rising urban populations, it can be cheaper and more profitable to build cities from scratch. Many new cities are privately funded or built through public–private

partnerships, which means that the main attraction for private companies is to make sound investments and maximize profits (Shepard 2019). The residential buildings they provide have tended to be luxury apartments and houses aimed at executives, the wealthy middle classes and business owners rather than affordable housing, which is just not as profitable and is therefore less attractive. Many workers in Songdo live outside the city, commuting in just for work, as property prices and rents are unaffordable.

In 2019 the population of Songdo was just over 100,000, only around one-third of what was planned. Although it is not exactly a 'ghost town', some residents say that it is difficult to socialize and establish relationships and can feel somewhat 'cold' (Poon 2018). Full completion of the $40 billion project was moved back from 2015 to 2022, and other new cities have similarly struggled to make it to completion or to hit their population targets. It is still too early to assess whether the 'new cities' trend will prove successful, but the speed of construction remains their most striking aspect.

Smart cities are just the latest development in what Kingsley Davis (1965) once described as the long-term 'urbanization of the human population', which clearly continues apace. More than half of the world's people now live in cities and urban regions. A small number of cities, including London and New York, have been conceptualized as 'global cities', described by Saskia Sassen (2001) as highly integrated 'command centres' for the world economy, whose influence extends far beyond national borders. Huge transnational corporations and a profusion of financial, technological and consulting services all have their headquarters in global cities.

The Globalization and World Cities Research Centre (GaWC) categorizes cities according to their global connectivity, placing London and New York as unrivalled in their level of integration in the global economy. Just below these two, but still with high levels of integration and connectivity, are Hong Kong, Beijing, Dubai, Singapore, Shanghai, Sydney and Paris (GaWC 2018). Shanghai, for example, has experienced the fastest economic growth of any city, averaging 12 per cent per annum since the early 1990s (apart from during the 2008–9 global recession). Around fifty-five multinationals created headquarters in the

city and more than 4,000 high-rise buildings were constructed, both in the first decade of the twenty-first century, changing the look and feel of Shanghai's urban environment (Chen 2009: xv–xx). The city population had risen to 24 million by 2013 and is forecast to more than double, to around 50 million people, by 2050 (World Population Review 2015). Shanghai may be well on the way to joining London and New York as a key command centre for the global economy.

Large cities and urban regions provide unrivalled work opportunities and cultural experiences, and yet, at the same time, many people actually find them lonely, unfriendly and alienating places. Why is this? A distinctive characteristic of contemporary urban living is the frequency of interactions between strangers. If you live in a town or city, think about the number of times you interact every day with people you do not know: a bus driver, shop worker, train passenger or people with whom you exchange 'pleasantries' in the street. These fleeting, relatively impersonal interactions make contemporary city life very different from other areas today or during earlier times. Even within the same neighbourhood or apartment block it is unlikely that people will know most of their neighbours. Marshall Berman (1983) sees this kind of urban experience as definitive of the period sociologists call 'modernity' (see chapter 1).

Social interaction is discussed in detail in chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life'.

In this chapter, we look at some of the sociological work on cities and urban development and what living in cities, or 'being urban', is like (Karp et al. 2015). We begin with a brief history of the development of city types from the ancient world to the densely populated cities of today. From here, we outline some key sociological theories of cities and urban culture which aim to help us understand better how people experience the city and what forces are shaping its future. We move on

to look at differences between cities and what an environmentally sustainable city might look like. It is worth noting at the outset that researchers studying cities and urban life are just as likely to be working in human geography as in sociology, and the chapter includes theories and evidence from across both disciplines.

Cities

Cities have a very long history, though their forms have been radically different. The early urban sociologists focused on the development of modern industrial cities, which they saw was changing how humans felt and thought about the world. Here, we look at the development of the industrial city and the most recent trends in urban development.

Industrialization and urbanization

The contrast between the largest modern cities and those of ancient civilizations is stark. The world's first cities developed around 3500 BCE, in the river valleys of the Nile in Egypt, the Tigris and Euphrates in what is now Iraq, and the Indus in what is today Pakistan. Establishing the size of the very largest ancient cities is difficult, as census data are not always available and there are differing definitions of what counts as a 'city' in this context. Nonetheless, it is argued that, for example, Yinxu, China, had a population of 120,000 in 1300 BCE, Babylon, in what is now Iraq, stood at 200,000 in 500 BCE, Pataliputra, India, had 350,000 in 200 BCE, and Alexandria, Egypt, had around 1 million by 100 BCE. Yet these are the very largest, and most cities in ancient societies were very small by modern standards, numbering no more than 10,000 to 20,000 people (Galka 2016).

By contrast, the most populous cities in the industrialized countries number well over 20 million inhabitants – Tokyo being the largest, with just under 38 million people living in the city and its suburbs (Demographia 2020). A conurbation – a cluster of cities and towns forming a continuous network – often includes even larger numbers. The largest form of urban life today is represented by the megalopolis, or the 'city of cities'. This term was originally coined in ancient Greece to refer to a city-state that was planned to be the envy of all civilizations, but in current usage is applied to areas such as the north-eastern seaboard of the United States, a conurbation covering some 450 miles from north of Boston to below Washington, DC, where around 40 million people live.

The world's largest city, Tokyo, a typical cityscape: desolate concrete jungle or the pinnacle of human achievement?

Britain was the first society to undergo industrialization, a process that began in the mid-eighteenth century (see chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change', for a definition and discussion). The process of industrialization generated rapid urbanization – movement of the population from rural areas into towns and cities. In 1800, fewer than 20 per cent of the British population lived in towns or cities of more than 10,000 inhabitants. By 1900, the proportion had risen to 74 per cent. The capital city, London, was home to about 1.1 million people in 1800; by the beginning of the twentieth century, it had a population of more than 7 million. London was by far the largest city ever seen – a vast manufacturing, commercial and financial centre at the heart of a still expanding British Empire. The urbanization of most other European countries and the United States took place somewhat later – but, once under way, tended to accelerate at a faster rate.

Urbanization is clearly now a global process. In 1950, only 30 per cent of the world's population were urban-dwellers, but by 2007 the number of people living in urban areas overtook the number of people in rural areas for the first time (UN 2010). By 2050 the global urban population is forecast to reach 70 per cent (Gassmann et al. 2019: 6). Most of today's urbanization takes place in the Global South, whose urban populations are expected to rise from 2 billion in 2000 to 4 billion in 2030. As figure 13.1 shows, urbanization in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean is rapidly increasing (a steeper line), while

the rate of urban population growth within Europe and Oceania has slowed over the same period but at higher levels. Increasingly, it seems, humans live in cities and very large, urban regions.

THINKING CRITICALLY

If the Global South urbanizes at a similar rate to the North, then somewhere between 75 and 85 per cent of the population of the world will live in large urban regions by mid-century. From the experience of the industrialized countries, how can it be argued that dense urban living for humans actually leads to reduced pressure on the natural environment?
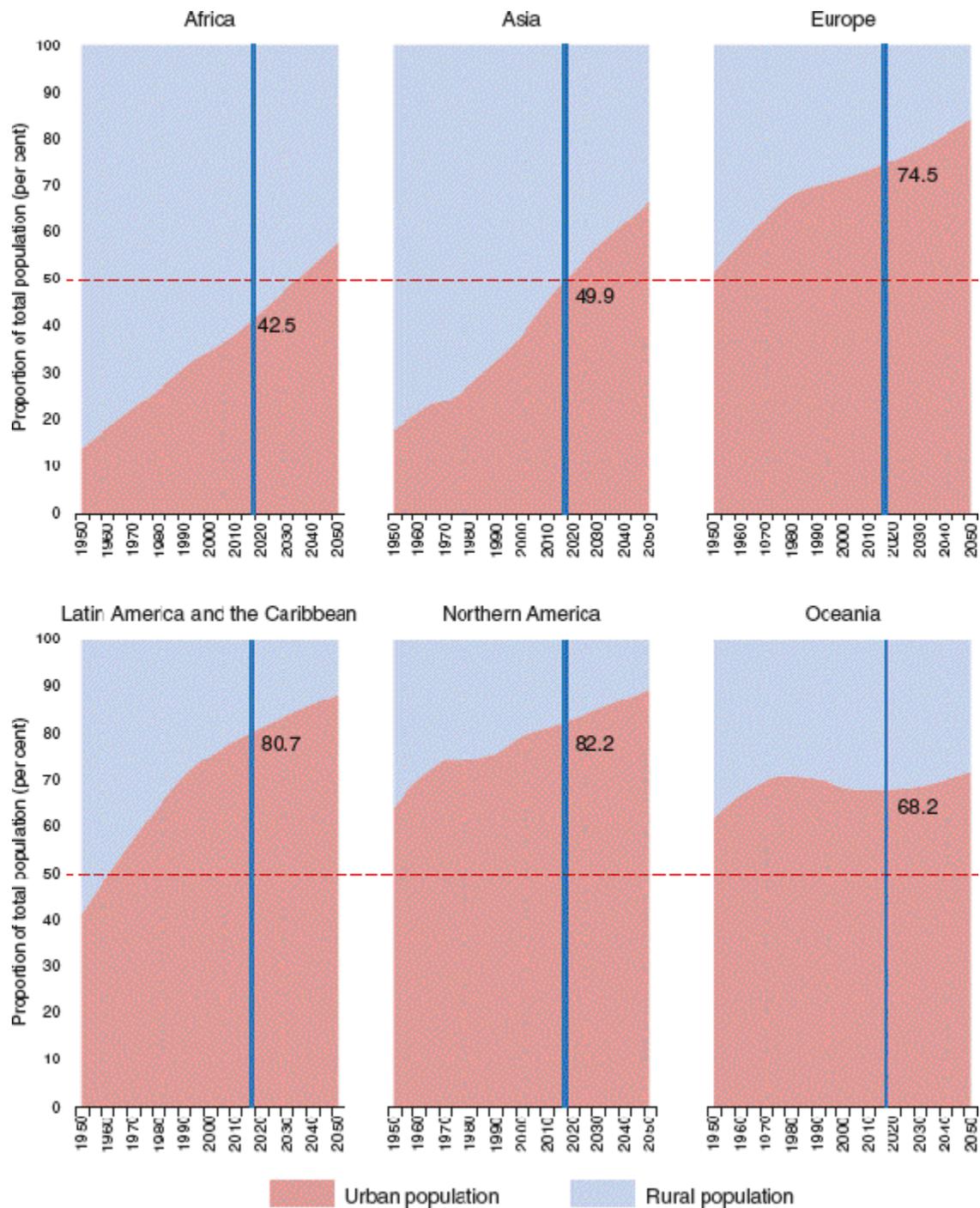
Figure 13.1 Urban and rural population as a proportion of the total, by geographic region, 1950–2050 (projected)

Source: UN DESA (2019a: 6).

Development of the modern city

There is no generally agreed definition of what constitutes a city, but most urban sociologists and human geographers would include at least the following features of modern industrial cities: large populations, dense settlements, occupational specialization and permanent markets, and the predominance of an impersonal, rational orientation among residents (Abrahamson 2014: 5–6). In short, a specific mix of demographic, economic, social and psychological features come together in creating 'the city', though, as we shall see, the modern city has no walls, and these features spread outwards into 'suburban' and rural areas too.

Some sociologists today prefer the concept of an urban or metropolitan region to those of city and suburb, as the former more accurately captures people's routines and everyday activities. Gottdiener et al. (2018: 1) argue that 'We may say we are from Arlington Heights, but we work, shop, attend schools, go to churches, synagogues, or mosques, and pursue recreation in an increasing variety of locations, all within an expanding metropolitan area.' Indeed, in the USA, metropolitan regions often cover up to 100 miles beyond the city centre, connected by roads, rail networks and communications infrastructure. However, the world's cities and urban areas are very diverse, and many metropolitan regions are much smaller than in the American case.

Only at the turn of the twentieth century did statisticians and social commentators begin to distinguish between the town and the city. Cities with large populations were usually more cosmopolitan than smaller centres, and the expansion of cities depended on migration, which was often international. The emigration of very large numbers of Europeans from poor farming backgrounds to the United States is one clear example. Peasants and villagers migrated to towns because of the lack of opportunities in rural areas and the apparent advantages and attractions of cities, such as more work, better wages and a range of goods and services. Cities were also becoming concentrated centres of financial and industrial power, and some entrepreneurs created new towns and urban areas almost from scratch.

As cities grew, many were horrified to see that inequalities and poverty also intensified. The extent of urban poverty and the vast differences between city neighbourhoods were motivating factors for early

sociological analyses of urban life. In 1899, the African-American sociologist and black civil rights campaigner W. E. B. Du Bois combined ethnography, social history (including the slave trade and its impact on Philadelphia's population) and descriptive statistics in a study of the urban lives of black communities in Philadelphia (Du Bois 2007 [1899]). Du Bois and his assistant mapped the Seventh Ward in the city of Philadelphia, a relatively poor district with chronic social problems such as crime, drug abuse and poverty. He also interviewed almost 5,000 people in various settings, from households to churches, businesses and political gatherings (Johnson 2009).

The project's findings differed substantially from the widely accepted notion that the area had a 'Negro problem', caused by black people being simply ignorant, lazy and lacking intelligence. Du Bois' systematic collection of data and careful analysis provided the evidence to show a range of social problems, including a lack of education, blocked access to better-paid occupations for men and restricted opportunities for black women, and widespread racial prejudice. And, while it was not responsible for every social problem, racism played a key role in maintaining a structure of advantage for whites and disadvantage for blacks. For instance, Du Bois found that the racist attitudes ('color prejudice') of white people played a part in the housing market, with African Americans being charged 'abnormally high rents' for very poor stock which pushed families into hardship and poverty.

Lemert (2000: 222) rightly describes Du Bois' work as 'the first important example of urban ethnography in America'. Yet it was largely ignored as a key work of sociology until the 1960s. Indeed, it was only in the twentieth century, with the emergence of postcolonial studies and efforts aimed at 'decolonizing' the discipline, that Du Bois became the subject of systematic reappraisal as an American pioneer of scientific methods in social [science](#).

The growth of cities in the nineteenth century is also associated with gender separation, as public life and public spaces were dominated by men, who were free to travel through the city. However, women were not expected to be seen in most public places, and those who did were likely to be regarded as prostitutes or 'street walkers'. Clearly such stark extremes do not exist today, though large numbers of women continue

to report the 'everyday sexism' they face from men when simply walking around the urban landscape or using crowded public transport. On the other hand, Wilson (2002) argues that the development of the city also offered women new opportunities, such as white-collar work and, later, the expansion of service industries. As a result, women increasingly entered the workforce and earned their own incomes, offering an escape from the unpaid labour at home.

As the process of *suburbanization* took off, gender separation grew more obvious. While the male 'head of the family' commuted into the city on a daily basis, women (wives) were expected to remain at home to care for the family. Transport links were built for travelling between the suburbs and the city centre, but little thought was given by male designers to transportation within the suburbs, as a result of which it became more difficult for women to leave home (Greed 1994). Simmel pointed out that 'the city' is a sociological entity that is formed spatially, and this urban formation has long been, and still is, gendered. As Beall (1998) argues, cities demonstrate the relationship between power and space in terms of what gets built, where it is built, how it is built and for whom: 'Cities are literally concrete manifestations of ideas on how society was, is and how it should be.'

Everyday sexism and inequalities of gender are discussed in [chapter 7](), 'Gender and Sexuality'.

The development of modern cities has had an enormous impact not only on habits and modes of behaviour but also on patterns of thought and feeling. From the time when large urban agglomerations first formed in the eighteenth century, views about the effects of cities on social life have been polarized. For many, cities represent 'civilized virtue' and are the wellspring of dynamism and cultural creativity, maximizing opportunities for economic and cultural development and providing the means for living a comfortable and satisfying existence.

But, for others, the city is a smoking inferno thronged with aggressive and mutually distrustful crowds, riddled with crime, sexual harassment of women, violence, inequality, corruption and poverty. It is of course possible for both views to coexist as partial characterizations of the realities of city living.

> See chapter 5, 'The Environment', for a discussion of environmental issues.

Global cities

The role of cities in processes of globalization has attracted a great deal of attention from sociologists and economists (Marcuse and van Kempen 2000; Massey 2007). Globalization is often thought of in terms of a duality between the national level and the global, yet it is the largest cities of the world that comprise the main circuits through which globalization occurs (Sassen 1998). The functioning of the global economy is dependent on a set of central locations with developed informational infrastructures and a 'hyperconcentration' of facilities. It is in such points that the 'work' of globalization is performed and directed. As business, production, advertising and marketing assume a global scale, there is an enormous amount of organizational activity which maintains and develops these networks.

Sassen uses the concept of the global city to describe urban centres that are home to the headquarters of large, transnational corporations and a superabundance of financial, technological and consulting services. In *The Global City* (2013 [1991]), she studied New York, London and Tokyo. The contemporary development of the world economy, she argued, has created a novel strategic role for such major cities which have long been centres of international trade, but now they have four new traits.

1. They have developed into 'command posts' – centres of direction and policy-making – for the global economy.

2. They are the key locations for financial and specialized service firms, which have become more important in influencing economic development than manufacturing industries.

3. They are the sites of production and innovation in the expanding corporate service industries and finance, including banking, advertising, accounting and legal services.

4. They are markets in which the 'products' of financial and service industries are bought, sold or otherwise disposed of.

Since Sassen's account, New York and London have come to be seen as the pre-eminent command centres compared with other key cities, such as Tokyo, Singapore, Beijing and Paris. Clearly, cities have very different histories, but we can trace comparable changes in their recent development. Within the contemporary, highly dispersed world economy, cities provide for the central control of crucial operations. Global cities are much more than places of coordination and are also contexts of production. What is important is the production, not of material goods, but of specialized services required by business organizations for administering offices and factories scattered across the world and of financial innovations and markets. Services and financial goods and, increasingly today, computing, data processing and digital services are the 'things' made by global cities.

Global society 13.1 How to design (and build) a global city: Dubai

The smart cities discussed in our chapter introduction demonstrate the ambition of planners and states in designing and building cities from scratch. Yet this process is by no means a new development, as the case of Dubai shows. At the end of the 1960s the town of Dubai sat in a relatively undeveloped region of the Persian Gulf that was still a home to nomadic groups and fishing communities. In 1971 it became part of the United Arab Emirates, and a plan was devised that would utterly transform the town and region. With billions of dollars from oil export profits and Western banks, Dubai's leaders brought together architects, planners and other professionals from the industrialized countries with the specific intention of creating a global city based on finance, commerce and the cultural industries.

Large numbers of professionals moved to Dubai from the USA, the UK, Australia and Japan, as well as from other countries across the world, and a huge building programme was set in train. This produced a typical modern city centre of office blocks and skyscrapers (including the world's tallest, Burj Khalifa) and a 1,000-berth marina, one of the largest in the world. First-class leisure and tourist attractions were added to the mix, among them an indoor snow park (not easy in a hot desert climate!), palm-shaped islands, shopping centres, golf courses, entertainment complexes and a zoo. There is little doubt that the plan was successful in its own terms. However, an important consequence of the way it was devised and implemented is that, despite the region being ostensibly Muslim, culturally, the Western influence on Dubai is particularly strong. English is the second language and is commonly spoken, supermarkets stock products familiar to expatriate communities, and many other aspects of daily life are recognizably Western. Abrahamson (2014: 205) notes that 'Dubai's financial analysts, corporate managers, engineers, and architects live in a variety of familiar-to-Westerners types of housing in gated communities (with names such as Emirates Hills) and suburban-style developments,

villas, and apartments ... Their leisure time is spent in malls and on beaches and golf courses. The rhythm of life is that of the generic global city.'

Dubai's Palm Island illustrates the city's plan to become a major global tourist destination.

Yet, as Dubai shifts away from a predominantly oil-based economy towards a more mixed economy involving property, finance, tourism and healthcare, low-wage jobs in the hospitality sector, construction and service industries draw in migrant workers from a wider range of countries than in the past, including people from China, South Korea and the Philippines (Kathiravelu 2016: 15–17).

Downtown areas of global cities provide concentrated sites within which whole clusters of 'producers' can work in close interaction with one another, often involving personal contact. In the global city, local firms mingle with national and multinational organizations, a multiplicity of foreign companies among them. Foreign banks and financial corporations have offices in New York City, and about one-quarter of bank employees in New York work for a foreign bank. Global cities compete with one another, but they also constitute an interdependent system, relatively separate from the nations in which they are located. And, as globalization progresses, more and more cities are joining the ranks of global cities, with Hong Kong, Singapore, Chicago, Frankfurt, Los Angeles, Milan, Zurich and Osaka serving as major centres for business and financial services. Madrid, São Paulo, Moscow, Seoul, Jakarta and Buenos Aires have also become important hubs for activity within emerging markets.

Theorizing urbanism

From the discussion so far we can say that today's cities are relatively large forms of human settlement within which a wide range of activities are performed, enabling them to become centres of power in relation to outlying areas and smaller settlements. This fits London, New York and Shanghai pretty well, though it is less applicable to the many smaller cities which lack the power resources of larger centres. If urbanization refers to the process which brings large cities into being, then urbanism refers to the lifestyles and personality types that characterize modern cities.

It is important to note that the contrast between urban and rural areas is neither clear-cut nor fixed, as the human settlement process is dynamic and characterized by constant movements of people. Some scholars see cities as 'spatially open' to such movement, making the concept of the city as a thing-like entity something of an anachronism (Amin and Thrift 2002). Indeed, long before current theories of 'mobilities' (Urry 2007), Buckminster Fuller (1978) thought that 'unsettlement' would be a more accurate description of the mobile character of modern life as such.

The concept of mobilities is discussed in chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

A helpful guide to evaluating urban theories is to assess the way they handle the 'four C's of urban experience': culture (the built environment, belief systems, cultural production), consumption (of public and private goods and services), conflict (over resources and development plans) and community (the social life and make-up of populations) (Parker 2003: 4–5). As we will see, most urban theories focus on one of these aspects in order to throw light on the others. And

though our discussion below is not rigidly framed by the four C's, readers should consider which theories deal most satisfactorily with each of these aspects.

Community and the urban personality

The German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855–1936) was particularly concerned with the effects of urbanization on social bonds and community solidarity. Tönnies charted, with some regret, the gradual loss of what he called *Gemeinschaft* – community bonds – which he characterized as traditional close-knit ties, personal and often lifelong relationships between neighbours and friends, and a sense of duty and commitment (Tönnies 2001 [1887]).

Gesellschaft, or 'associational' bonds, were rapidly impinging on community relations. *Gesellschaft* bonds were impersonal, relatively short-lived, transitory and instrumental in character. And while all societies contain social bonds of both types, with industrialization and urbanization the balance was shifting decisively away from *Gemeinschaft*. In this society, relationships tend to be specific to a particular setting and purpose and take into account only a part of the whole person. When we are travelling by bus into work, our interaction with the driver is limited to a brief impersonal exchange at the door as we pay, and our use for him will be limited to his ability to get us to our destination. This kind of instrumental exchange between strangers has become more commonplace and now passes without comment as 'normal'. Indeed, even Tönnies recognized that, in spite of his concerns, rapid urbanization was leading inexorably to the dominance of *Gesellschaft* bonds.

Classic studies 13.1 The metropolis and mental life

The research problem

Many people in the nineteenth century saw that urbanization fundamentally changed societies, but what effects would this have on individuals? Would it alter their attitudes and behaviour? And what exactly is it about city living that produces such changes? One of Tönnies's German contemporaries, Georg Simmel (1858–1918), provided a theoretical account of how the city shapes its inhabitants' 'mental life'. Simmel's 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1950 [1903]), Tönnies remarked, had managed to capture 'the flavour of the metropolis'.

Simmel's explanation

Simmel's study would today be described as a piece of interpretative sociology that seeks to understand and convey something about how people *experience* the city. City life, says Simmel, bombards the mind with images and impressions, sensations and activity. This is 'a deep contrast with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm' of the small town or village. But it is just not possible to respond to all of these stimuli, so how do people deal with the sensual bombardment?

Simmel argues that people protect themselves from the city's assault on their senses by becoming quite blasé and disinterested, adopting a 'seen-it-all-before' attitude. They 'tune out' much of the urban buzz that surrounds them, becoming highly selective and focusing on whatever they need to do. The result of this blasé attitude is that, although all city-dwellers are part of the 'metropolitan crush', they distance themselves from one another emotionally as well as physically. Typically, the myriad fleeting contacts with others result in an 'urban reserve' in interactions, which can be perceived as emotionless and rather cold, leading to widespread feelings of impersonality and even isolation. But Simmel points out that city people are not *by nature* uncaring or

indifferent to others. Rather, they are forced to adopt such modes of behaviour in order to preserve their individual selves in the face of pressures from the densely populated urban environment.

Simmel notes that the sheer pace of urban life partly explains the typical urban personality. But he also says that the city is 'the seat of the money economy'. Many cities are large, capitalistic financial centres that demand punctuality, rational exchange and an instrumental approach to business. This encourages relentless matter-of-fact dealings between people and offers little room for emotional connection, resulting in 'calculating minds' capable of weighing the benefits and costs of involvement in relationships. Like the work of Tönnies, Simmel's study points to some of the emerging problems of life in the modern, urbanized world.

Critical points

Critics of Simmel's study have raised a number of objections. His arguments seem to be based on personal observation and insights rather than on any formal or replicable research method, and thus his findings can be seen as somewhat speculative. Also, despite Simmel's insistence that he set out merely to understand urban life and not to damn it, the overall tone of the study has been seen as negative, revealing a normative bias against the capitalist city. It is true that his work focuses on ways in which individuals can resist being 'levelled down and worn out by a sociotechnological mechanism'. In this sense, critics say, Simmel plays down the liberating experience of many people who move to cities to experience its greater freedoms and room for individual expression.

Finally, the study may be guilty of overgeneralizing from a specific type of large city to all cities. After all, only a minority of cities are large financial centres, and those that are not may well be less alienating and isolating than Simmel allows for. Can we really say that *all* urbanites have the same experience?

Contemporary significance

Simmel's account of life in the modern metropolis provides a sociological explanation for some key characteristics of

contemporary urbanism. His theoretical study shows how the quality of social interactions is shaped by pressures arising from the wider social environment. An important consequence of this is his view that the city 'is not a spatial entity with social consequences, but a sociological entity that is formed spatially.' This has proved a very productive starting point for later urban studies.

Simmel's influence can also be felt in modern social theory. He argued that 'The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces' (Simmel 1950 [1903]: 409). There is more than an echo of this perspective in the more recent work of Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman and other contemporary theorists of individual freedom and global pressures.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Spend an hour observing the movements and behaviour of city-dwellers, perhaps in a shopping centre or on a street. Which of Simmel's main features, such as the blasé attitude and urban reserve, are still observable in today's cities? Do you see any evidence that these features may not be definitive of contemporary urbanism?

The early theorists of the city had a deep and enduring influence on urban sociology. Robert Park, a key member of the Chicago School of sociology, studied under Simmel in Germany at the turn of the twentieth century, and it is to this school that we now turn.

The Chicago School

A number of sociologists associated with the University of Chicago from the 1920s to the 1940s, including Robert Park, Ernest Burgess and Louis Wirth, developed ideas that were for many years the basis of theory and research in urban sociology. Two concepts developed by the Chicago School are worthy of special attention. One is the 'ecological approach' in urban analysis; the other is the characterization of

urbanism as 'a way of life', developed by Wirth (Wirth 1938; Park 1952).

Urban ecology

Ecology is a physical science which studies the adaptation of plant and animal organisms to their environment, and it is this sense of ecology that is used in the context of environmental issues and problems (see chapter 5, 'The Environment'). In the natural world, organisms tend to be distributed in systematic ways so that, over time, a balance or equilibrium between different species is achieved. The Chicago School of sociology argued that the siting of major urban settlements and the distribution of different types of neighbourhood and social groups within them could be understood in terms of similar principles.

Cities do not grow up at random but develop in response to advantageous features of the environment. For example, large urban areas in modern societies have developed along the shores of rivers, on fertile plains or at the intersection of trading routes or railways. Many, but by no means all, of the planned smart cities of the twenty-first century continue this trend. For example, the new city of Khorgos, begun in 2014 and aiming for a population of some 200,000 people, straddles the border between China and Kazakhstan, purposely to be part of a development zone serving emerging trade routes known as the New Silk Road (Shepard 2017).

However, cities are also internally divided. 'Once set up', in Park's words, 'a city is, it seems, a great sorting mechanism which … infallibly selects out of the population as a whole the individuals best suited to live in a particular region or a particular milieu' (1952: 79). Thus, through processes of competition, invasion and succession – all concepts taken from biological ecology – cities become ordered into different zones or areas. Different neighbourhoods develop through the adjustments made by inhabitants as they struggle to gain their livelihoods. A city can be pictured as a map of areas with distinct and contrasting social characteristics.

In the initial stages of growth, industries congregate at sites suitable for the raw materials they need and close to supply lines. Populations

cluster around these, amenities follow, and land values and property taxes rise, making it difficult for families to carry on living in the central neighbourhood, except in cramped conditions or decaying housing where rents are still low. The centre becomes dominated by businesses and entertainment, with the more affluent residents moving out to newly forming suburbs.

Cities tend to form in concentric rings, broken up into segments. In the centre are the inner-city areas, a mixture of big business prosperity and decaying private houses. Beyond these are longer-established neighbourhoods, housing workers employed in stable manual occupations. Further out still are the suburbs in which higher-income groups tend to live. Processes of 'invasion' and 'succession' occur within the segments of the concentric rings. Thus, as property decays in a central area, the pre-existing population moves out, precipitating a wholesale flight to neighbourhoods elsewhere in the city or out to the suburbs.

The Lozells area of Birmingham in the UK saw an eruption of violence in 2005 between the ethnic communities who make up the majority population. Was this the result of increasingly segregated ethnic communities?

The urban ecology approach was extended in the work of a series of later researchers. Rather than concentrating on competition for scarce resources, Hawley (1950, 1968) emphasized the *interdependence* of different city areas. *Differentiation* – the specialization of groups and occupational roles – is the main way in which human beings adapt to their environment. Groups on which many others depend will take dominant roles, often reflected in their central geographical position. Business groups, for example, such as large banks or insurance companies, provide key services for many community members and are usually to be found in the central areas. But the zones which develop in urban areas, Hawley points out, arise from relationships both of space and of time. Business dominance, for example, is expressed not only in patterns of land use but also in the rhythm of activities in daily life, such as the 'rush hour'.

The ecological approach has been as important for the empirical research it promoted as for its theoretical perspective. However, legitimate criticisms can be made of it. Its biological analogy has been seen as intimating an unfounded link between human and animal societies. The ecological perspective also underemphasizes the importance of conscious design and planning in city organization, regarding urban development as a more 'natural' process. Also, the models of spatial organization developed by Park, Burgess and their colleagues were drawn from their American experience and cannot readily be generalized beyond this. Many European cities, as well as many if not most of those in the Global South, just do not conform to the urban ecology model.

Classic studies 13.2 Urbanism as a way of life

The research problem

We know from Simmel that the urban environment tends to create particular personality types and that there is a broad pattern to the development of cities. But how do cities relate to and interact with the rest of society? Does urbanism exert any influence outside city boundaries? Louis Wirth (1897–1952) explored the idea that urbanism was, in fact, a whole way of life, not an experience limited to the city.

Wirth's explanation

While other members of the Chicago School focused on understanding the shape of the city – how it came to be internally divided – Wirth was concerned more with [urbanism](#) as a distinct way of life. Urbanism, he argued, could not be reduced to or understood simply by measuring the size of urban populations. Instead, it has to be grasped as a form of social existence. Wirth (1938: 2) observed that:

> The influences which cities exert upon the social life of man are greater than the ratio of the urban population would indicate, for the city is not only in ever larger degrees the dwelling-place and the workshop of modern man, but it is the initiating and controlling center of economic, political, and cultural life that has drawn the most remote parts of the world into its orbit and woven diverse areas, peoples, and activities into a cosmos.

In cities, large numbers of people live in close proximity, without knowing one another personally. This is in fundamental contrast to the situation in small villages and towns. Many contacts between city-dwellers are, as Tönnies suggested, fleeting and partial; they are means to other ends rather than being satisfying relationships in themselves. Wirth calls these 'secondary contacts', compared with the 'primary contacts' of familial and strong community

relationships. For example, interactions with salespeople in shops, baristas in coffee shops, or drivers and ticket collectors on buses are passing encounters, entered into not for their own sake, as in communal relations, but merely as means to other ends.

Since those who live in urban areas tend to be highly mobile, moving around to find work and to enjoy leisure and travel, the bonds between them are relatively weak. People are involved in many different activities and situations each day, and the 'pace of life' in cities is much faster than that in rural areas. Competition prevails over cooperation and social relationships appear flimsy and brittle. Of course, the Chicago School's ecological approach found that the density of social life in cities leads to the formation of neighbourhoods with distinct characteristics, some of which may preserve the characteristics of small communities. In immigrant areas, for example, traditional connections between families are found, with most people knowing most others on a personal basis. Similarly, Young and Willmott's (1957) classic study, *Family and Kinship in East London* found strong connections among working-class families in the city.

However, although Wirth accepted this, he argued that, the more these areas became absorbed into the wider patterns of city life, the less would community characteristics survive. The urban way of life weakens bonds of kinship and erodes ties within families and communities, and older bases of social solidarity are rendered ineffective. Wirth was not blind to the benefits of urbanism. He saw that modern cities were centres of freedom, toleration and progress, but he also argued that urbanism spread beyond city boundaries, as is shown by the process of suburbanization, with all of its necessary transport systems and infrastructure. In that sense, modern societies themselves are necessarily shaped by the forces of urbanism.

Critical points

Critics have pointed out the limitations of Wirth's ideas. Like the ecological perspective, Wirth's thesis is rooted in the experience of American cities and should not be seen as a general theory of city

life. Urbanism is not the same at all times and in all places. Ancient cities were quite different from modern ones, and many cities in the Global South today are quite different from those in the North.

Wirth has also been criticized for exaggerating the extent of impersonality in modern cities. Communities involving close friendship or kinship links are more persistent than he thought. Everett Hughes (cited in Kasarda and Janowitz 1974: 338) notes that 'Louis used to say all those things about how the city is impersonal – while living with a whole clan of kin and friends on a very personal basis.' Similarly, Herbert Gans (1962) argued that 'urban villagers' – such as Italian Americans living in inner-city Boston – were quite commonly found in even the largest cities. Wirth's picture of modern cities needs to be expanded by acknowledging that city life can lead to the *building* of communities rather than *always* destroying them.

Contemporary significance

Wirth's ideas have deservedly enjoyed wide currency. The impersonality of many day-to-day contacts in modern cities is undeniable, and to some degree this is true of contemporary social life more generally. His theory is also important for its recognition that urbanism is not just one part of society but actually expresses and influences the character of the wider social system. Given the expanding process of urbanization in many countries in the Global South and the fact that a majority of their populations already live in urban areas, Wirth's ideas will continue to be a reference point for sociologists looking to understand urbanism as a way of life.

Fischer (1984) argued that urbanism promotes diverse subcultures rather than submerging everyone within an anonymous mass. Those who live in cities are able to collaborate with others of similar backgrounds or interests to develop local connections and can voluntarily join distinctive religious, ethnic, political and other subcultural groups. A small town or village does not allow for the development of such cultural diversity.

A large city may well be a 'world of strangers', but it also helps to create new personal relationships. This is not paradoxical. We must separate the public sphere of encounters with strangers from the more private world of family, friends and work colleagues. Cities do frequently involve many impersonal, anonymous social relationships, but they are also sources of diversity and voluntary friendships. Voluntary groups of many kinds, sports fans, occupational groups and online networks are not necessarily rooted in or defined by a geographical place, but they are still experienced as forms of community life.

Today, communities may be less bound to specific places but are constituted through a range of quite ordinary public practices. Blokland (2017: 5) observes that the concept of 'community' in the social sciences is often seen as 'old-fashioned' and out-of-date, largely because it seems to refer to something like Tönnies's place-based idea, which suggests a 'one-to-one fit of "a community" with "a place"'. In some areas this may still be the case, as longstanding residents and families may view 'incomers' as unlikely to stay too long and therefore do not consider them to be part of 'their' community. This is a reminder that community always involves relations of power and mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion.

But in an age when people are much more likely *not* to live in the places where they were born, the connection between community and place has been broken. Today, community is practised in social networks that often have no roots in a specific place and are more likely to overlap numerous physical places. Yet the desire for a collective sense of belonging remains strong. As Blokland (2017: 1) puts it, 'Some people may have roots and others may have routes, but all do community.'

City spaces, surveillance and inequality

More recent theories have stressed that urban development is a process that is not autonomous or wholly endogenous (generated from within) but one that has to be analysed in relation to major patterns of political and economic change and the restructuring of space. This shift has often been referred to as the New Urban Sociology. Two leading scholars, David Harvey (1982, 1985, 2006) and Manuel Castells (1983,

1991, 1997), are both influenced by the ideas of Marx. Harvey argues that urbanism is one aspect of the [created environment](#) brought about by the spread of industrial capitalism. In older societies, city and countryside were clearly differentiated, but, in the modern world, industrial development blurs the distinction between city and countryside. Farming and agricultural production become mechanized and run according to considerations of price and profit, which reduces the differences between urban and rural life.

Modern urbanism, Harvey points out, continually *restructures* space. The process is determined by where large firms choose to place their factories, research and development centres, and so on, as well as by the controls asserted by governments over land use and industrial production and the activities of private investors, buying and selling property and land. Business firms constantly weigh the relative advantages of new locations against existing ones, and, as production becomes cheaper in one area than another, or as firms move from one product to another, offices and factories will be closed down in one place and opened up elsewhere. Thus, when there are considerable profits to be made, there may be a spate of office blocks built in the centre of large cities but, once the central area is 'redeveloped', investors look for speculative building elsewhere. Hence, what is profitable in one period will not necessarily be so in another, depending on shifts in the prevailing financial climate.

Similarly, the decisions of private home-buyers are strongly influenced by how far, and where, business interests buy land, as well as by interest rates and taxes set by local and central government. After the Second World War, for instance, there was a vast expansion of suburban development in major cities in the USA, partly the result of ethnic discrimination and the decisions of white Americans to move away from inner-city areas, often called 'white flight'. However, this was made possible, Harvey argues, only because of government decisions to give tax concessions to home-buyers and construction firms and the setting up of special credit arrangements by financial organizations. These provided the basis for the building and buying of new homes on city peripheries and at the same time promoted demand for industrial products such as the motor car.

Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl is a municipality in the Mexico City Metropolitan Area. The land was sold to private buyers in the twentieth century and a sprawling conurbation was built with inadequate public services which became a notorious slum. But, in 2020, Mexico City was named the seventh richest city in the world.

Harvey (2006) also applied his theory of uneven spatial development to global inequalities between the relatively rich countries of the northern hemisphere and the relatively poor in the Global South. The turn towards neo-liberal political ideas, especially in the USA and the UK from the 1970s and 1980s, laid bare the myth that developing economies just need to 'catch up with the West'. As capitalist profits were invested in city-centre housing, office blocks and other urban projects in the Global North, such as Britain and Spain, the property-driven boom also led to rapid urbanization in China, Mexico and elsewhere.

Yet the overall result was not a 'catching-up' by countries in the Global South but the restoration of power to class elites, leaving immense wealth in the hands of relatively few people. Harvey (2008: 32) noted that 'Fourteen billionaires have emerged in Mexico since then [the 1980s], and in 2006 that country boasted the richest man on earth,

Carlos Slim, at the same time as the incomes of the poor had either stagnated or diminished.' The result is increasingly divided cities with heightened surveillance, gated communities to protect the wealthy and the privatization of public spaces.

Many cities in the Global South are also divided into rich and poor areas, with intensified surveillance systems and wealthy, gated communities. And, while there are some clear differences between cities in the Global South and North, there is increasing convergence in the use of surveillance to identify and remove threats to security (such as drugs, criminals and terrorism) that lie hidden within the urban environment. For example, many cities in both the northern and the southern hemisphere make use of computerized CCTV systems, identity checkpoints, and biometric surveillance techniques such as AI-based facial recognition to defend financial districts, shopping arcades, airports and gated communities (see Mike Davis's ideas in ['Using your sociological imagination' 13.1](#)).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

13.1 Social inequalities in 'cities of quartz'

Within the major cities, a geography of 'centrality and marginality' can be discerned. Alongside very visible affluence, there is also acute poverty, and these two worlds exist side by side. Yet contact between them can be surprisingly minimal. As Davis (1990, 2006) noted in his studies of Los Angeles, there had been a 'conscious hardening' of the city's surface against the poor – hence the metaphor of rock-hard 'quartz'. Accessible public spaces had been replaced by walled compounds, neighbourhoods were guarded by electronic surveillance, rich residents hired private police to keep street gangs at bay, and 'corporate citadels' had been created. In Davis's words (1990: 232):

> To reduce contact with untouchables, urban redevelopment has converted once vital pedestrian streets into traffic sewers and transformed public parks into temporary receptacles for the homeless and wretched. The American city … is being systematically turned inside out – or, rather, outside in. The valorized spaces of the new megastructures and supermalls are concentrated in the center, street frontage is denuded, public activity is sorted into strictly functional compartments, and circulation is internalized in corridors under the gaze of private police.

According to Davis, life was made as 'unliveable' as possible for the poorest and most marginalized residents of Los Angeles. Benches at bus stops are barrel-shaped to prevent people from sleeping on them, the number of public toilets is fewer than in any other North American city, and sprinkler systems have been installed in parks to deter the homeless from living there. Police and city planners have attempted to contain the homeless population within certain regions of the city, but, in periodically sweeping through and

confiscating makeshift shelters, they have effectively created a population of 'urban bedouins'.

Abrahamson (2014: 116) notes that around 100,000 people in Los Angeles county sleep rough in doorways, sidewalks or shelters every night, many of them in outlying suburbs rather than in the city centre, where they are not welcome. He argues that, as the police continually move them on or arrest them for loitering, begging and other minor misdemeanours, homelessness in the city of Los Angeles has effectively been criminalized.

See chapter 22, 'Crime and Deviance', for a discussion of situational crime prevention and other recent crime-prevention techniques.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Davis's original study was published in 1990. Have cities continued to develop in the direction he outlined? Do some research into your nearest city: has rough sleeping increased or reduced? Are there more gated communities and residential compounds today than twenty years ago? What evidence is there to suggest that cities of quartz have become even harder for disadvantaged social groups to live in?

One reason why cities are becoming places of heightened surveillance is suggested by Stephen Graham (2011), who argues that techniques and technologies which were designed for war zones have crossed over into civilian applications in urban environments. Twenty-first-century terrorist attacks in New York, London, Madrid, Mumbai, Brussels and Paris suggest that urban environments have become key sites for groups waging war against states by targeting urban populations. In response, governments have adopted military-style surveillance

techniques of monitoring and targeting suspected terrorists and other threats to urban security, including extensive use of satellite communications, offender risk profiling and the monitoring of postal systems, internet use, financial transactions and transportation systems (Mills and Huber 2002). Similarly, the language of a 'war against drugs', the 'war against crime' or the 'war against terror' shows that military metaphors have become an accepted part of public policy debates.

Terrorism is discussed in [chapter 21](#), 'Nations, War and Terrorism'.

Graham (2011: xvi) argues that, collectively, these developments constitute a 'new military urbanism' – a type of urbanism that diverges from earlier forms. Cities are being steadily transformed from places of creativity, free movement and cosmopolitan diversity into highly securitized zones: 'The new military urbanism feeds on experiments with styles of targeting, and technology in colonial war-zones, such as Gaza or Baghdad, or security operations at international sports events or political summits. These operations act as testing grounds for technology and techniques to be sold on through the world's burgeoning homeland security markets.' In this environment, non-violent demonstrations, urban social movements and the dissenting voices of the past find their activities continuously monitored or curtailed in the interests of maintaining order and security.

The operation of the global economy also generates new dynamics of inequality that are clearly visible within the city. The juxtaposition of a central business district and impoverished inner-city areas is interrelated. The 'growth sectors' of the new economy, such as financial services, marketing and high technology, reap greater profits than any found in traditional sectors. As the salaries and bonuses of the very affluent continue to climb, the wages of those employed to clean and guard their offices are falling. This process echoes the analysis of David Harvey, who argues that the city is not just a place or location for social

relations but is itself the *product* of struggles and conflicts among social groups. Sassen (2001) contends that we are witnessing the 'valorization' of work located at the forefront of the global economy and the 'devalorization' of work which takes place behind the scenes.

Deprivation and social exclusion are discussed in chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare', and inequalities in chapter 6, 'Global Inequality'.

Disparities in profit-making capabilities are expected in market economies, but their magnitude has many negative effects on the social world, from housing to the labour market. Those who work in finance and global services receive high salaries, and the areas where they live become 'gentrified' (see the '*Gentrification and urban recycling*' section below). At the same time, manufacturing jobs are lost and the process of gentrification – the remodelling of working-class areas to create environments suitable for wealthier groups – creates a huge supply of low-wage, insecure employment – in restaurants, shops, hotels and boutiques. Affordable housing is scarce in 'gentrified' areas and, while central business districts receive massive influxes of investment in property, development and telecommunications, the marginalized areas are left with few resources.

Social movements and collective consumption

Castells argues that the spatial form of society is closely linked to the overall mechanisms of its development. To understand cities, we have to grasp the processes whereby spatial forms are created and transformed. The layout and architectural features of cities and neighbourhoods express struggles and conflicts between different groups in society. In other words, urban environments represent

symbolic and spatial manifestations of broader social forces (Tonkiss 2006). For example, skyscrapers may be built because they are expected to provide profit, but the giant buildings also 'symbolise the power of money over the city through technology and self-confidence and are the cathedrals of the period of rising corporate capitalism' (Castells 1983: 103).

In contrast to the Chicago sociologists, Castells sees the city not only as a distinct location – the urban area – but also as an integral part of processes of collective consumption, which in turn form an inherent aspect of industrial capitalism. Schools, transport services and leisure amenities are all ways in which people collectively 'consume' services provided by the state or private companies. The taxation system influences both who is able to buy or rent where and who builds where. Large corporations, banks and insurance companies, which provide capital for building projects, have a great deal of power over these processes. But government agencies also directly affect many aspects of city life by building roads and public housing, planning green belts on which new development cannot encroach, and so on. The physical shape of cities is thus a product of both market forces and the power of government.

The character of the created environment is not just the result of the activities of wealthy and powerful people. Castells stresses the importance of the struggles of less privileged groups to alter their own living conditions. Urban problems stimulate a range of social movements – concerned with improving housing conditions, protesting against air pollution, defending parks and green belts, and combating building development that changes the nature of an area. Castells studied the gay rights movement in San Francisco, which succeeded in restructuring neighbourhoods around its own cultural values – allowing many gay organizations, clubs and bars to flourish – and gaining a prominent position in local politics.

Castells (1991) maintains not only that cities have been shaped by the restructuring of capitalism since the 1970s but that a new 'informational mode of development' has emerged, based on the introduction of new technology and its uneven distribution across societies. What information technology offers is more flexibility for

organizations to achieve their goals, as it enables them to be partially freed from specific places and territories. The combination of the informational mode of development and capitalist restructuring allows corporations to sidestep some of the established, place-based control mechanisms.

Global flows of information, capital and marketing messages can bypass the regulatory systems of territorial city and local governments and nation-states. Castells (1991: 349) puts this succinctly: 'People live in places, power rules through flows.' However, he argues that networks of local governments and organized citizens' groups should look to form their own strategic alliances with the aim of avoiding the kind of 'tribal' divisions which allow the powerful to 'divide and rule'. Only by acting collectively can citizens hope to exert an influence over the future shape of the urban landscape.

Evaluation

The work of Harvey and Castells has been widely debated and has been important in redirecting urban analysis. In contrast to the urban ecology approach, it highlights not the 'natural' or internal spatial processes within cities but how the created environment reflects social and economic systems of power. This marks a significant shift of emphasis. In some ways, the theories of Harvey and Castells and those of the Chicago School usefully complement each other and may be combined to give a more comprehensive picture of urban processes such as regeneration.

In 2014, the *Evening Standard* described Kensington and Chelsea in London as a 'ghost town of the super-rich'. The richest borough in the UK also had one of the highest empty-home rates, with 1,700 'long-term' empty homes – a striking example of the buy-to-leave phenomenon.

Regeneration of the physical environment tends to move according to discontinuous investment cycles rather than being a continuous process. For example, between 1980 and 2000, urban development witnessed a boom, followed by a slump and then another round of significant investment (Fainstein 2001). In the early 1980s, many large cities experienced a development boom promoted by investment from private property developers, public officials and financial institutions. Although in both the UK and the USA the strategy was for some form of public–private partnership, in London redevelopment was essentially state-led, while in New York it was private-sector involvement that led the process.

However, economic recession in the early 1990s brought the boom to an end, and some major projects failed. London's Canary Wharf

development was bankrupt by 1993, while New York's Time Square project had stalled a year later. But, by the end of the decade, booming real-estate markets in the Global North stimulated a new cycle of building investment (Fainstein 2001). Urban space, land and buildings are bought and sold, just like other goods, and the city is shaped by the way that various groups want to use the property they buy and sell. However, as Fainstein shows, urban development is enabled or constrained by global economic forces too. For instance, wealthy parts of London, such as Knightsbridge and Belgravia, have seen the growth of 'buy to leave' as international investors buy mainly new-build properties with the intention of leaving them empty, to be sold on later at a profit. Low interest rates and a booming housing market have created new opportunities for this kind of property speculation, which some see as creating 'ghost towns of the super-rich' (Norwood 2016).

Many tensions and conflicts arise in different localities as a result of regeneration planning, and these are key factors which structure neighbourhoods. For instance, large financial and business firms continually try to intensify land use in specific areas. The more they can do so, the more there are opportunities for land speculation and the profitable construction of new buildings, but there is little concern for the social and physical effects of their activities, which may mean the loss of green spaces and community facilities in the push for large office blocks and apartments aimed at the wealthy.

Development processes fostered by large property development companies are often challenged by local businesses or residents. People come together in neighbourhood groups in order to defend their interests by campaigning for the extension of zoning restrictions or seeking to defend green spaces. The uncertain outcome of these conflicts shows that the urban ecology approach, rooted in struggles over scarce resources and processes of invasion and succession, still has a role to play in understanding urban restructuring.

Urban trends, infrastructure and sustainable cities

Before modern times, cities were self-contained entities that stood apart from the predominantly rural areas in which they were located. Travel was a specialized affair for merchants, soldiers and others who needed to cross distances with any regularity, but communication between cities was limited. The twenty-first-century picture could hardly be more different. Globalization has had a profound effect, making cities more interdependent and encouraging the proliferation of horizontal links across national borders.

Some predict that globalization, digital technology and robotics are leading to the death of cities as we know them. This is because many older functions of cities can now be carried out in cyberspace rather than in dense and congested urban areas. Financial markets are electronic, e-commerce reduces the need for producers and consumers to rely on city centres, and digital technology allows for remote working as a growing number of employees are able to work from home rather than in city offices. It is also the case that some already highly developed cities have seen their population decrease in the last decade as people move out to the suburbs or seek their own 'escape to the country', having become weary of the pace of life, pollution and congestion that characterizes most big cities (Kamphuis 2017).

Yet, thus far at least, rather than undermining cities, globalization and digital technologies are transforming them into vital hubs within the global economy. Urban centres have become crucial in coordinating information flows, managing business activities and innovating new services and technologies. And, as the example of Songdo in South Korea shows, the advent of new, smart cities aims to solve the city's chronic problems, combining digital technology and the Internet of Things to create new urban environments that people will want to live in. The city may not be dying just yet, but it is definitely 'evolving'.

Urban trends in the Global North

Cities and urban areas today are in some ways very different environments from those of the early twentieth century, and we now turn to some of the more significant processes of change. In this section, we consider some of the main patterns in Western urban development in the post-war era, using Britain and the United States as examples. Attention will focus on the rise of suburban areas, the decline of inner-city areas, and strategies aimed at urban renewal.

Suburbanization

In the USA, the process of [suburbanization](#) – the growth of areas on the edge of cities – reached its peak in the 1950s and 1960s, when city centres had a 10 per cent growth rate and that of the suburban areas was 48 per cent. Most of the early movement to the suburbs involved white families, many of which opposed racial mixing in schools, and relocating to the suburbs was an attractive option for families seeking out all-white schools.

However, the white domination of suburbia in the USA was eroded as more minority ethnic groups moved out of the city. Data from the 2000 US Census showed that minority ethnic groups made up 27 per cent of suburban populations, up from 19 per cent in 1990. Like the people who began the exodus to suburbia in the 1950s, members of minority ethnic groups who move to the suburbs are mostly middle-class professionals in search of better housing, schools and amenities. Yet, as more ethnic groups moved to the suburbs over time, this tended to produce ethnically segregated rather than diverse communities (Hanlon and Vicino 2019).

In the UK, many of the suburbs around London grew up between the two world wars and were clustered round new roads and train links that brought commuters into the centre. The migration of the residential population from central city areas to outlying suburbs and dormitory towns (towns outside the city boundaries occupied by people who work in the city) in the 1970s and early 1980s saw the population of Greater London drop by about half a million. In the industrial towns of the North, the rapid loss of manufacturing industry during this period also reduced the population of inner-city areas. At the same time, many smaller cities and towns grew quickly, including

Cambridge, Ipswich, Norwich, Oxford and Leicester. The 'flight to the suburbs' has had dramatic implications for the health and vitality of both British and American urban centres, though this population decline has been reversed over recent years, and many large city populations have been growing again – a process labelled 're-urbanization – largely a result of gentrification and partly because of inward migration.

Inner-city decay

Inner-city decay has marked all large cities since the 1980s. One reason for the decay in Britain's inner cities lies in the financial crises that affected many areas. From the late 1970s onwards, central government put pressure on local authorities to limit their budgets and cut local services, even in those areas most subject to decay. This led to intense conflict between government and many of the councils that ran distressed inner-city areas when they could not meet their set budgets. A number of city councils had less revenue and were compelled to cut back on what were regarded as essential services. Since the credit crisis of 2008 and its aftermath, councils have again found themselves struggling to maintain key services, and the situation today remains difficult.

As the financial crisis of 2008 demonstrates, inner-city decay is related to changes in the global economy. Newly industrialized countries such as Singapore, Taiwan or Mexico often offer much cheaper labour costs than places such as the UK, thus making them attractive locations for manufacturing. In response, some industrialized nations such as Japan and (West) Germany shifted their economies in the 1980s to the kinds of activity that require a high level of capital investment and a highly skilled, well-educated workforce.

In an important UK study, Harrison (1983) examined the impact of global changes on Hackney, one of London's poorest boroughs. The number of manufacturing jobs there dropped from 45,500 in 1973 to 27,400 in 1981 – a fall of 40 per cent. Until the mid-1970s, Hackney's male unemployment rate was roughly level with the national average, but by 1981 it had risen to 17.1 per cent (50 per cent above the average). As the number of people out of work increased, so too did the

number living in poverty. The consequences are poorer health, fewer educational qualifications, high levels of crime and vandalism, and the potential for ethnic tensions and conflict (ibid.: 23–4).

Sometimes these multiple disadvantages overlap to such an extent that they burst forth in the form of urban conflict and unrest. In an era of globalization, population movements and rapid change, large cities have become concentrated and intensified expressions of social problems in society as a whole. Simmering tensions rise to the surface, sometimes violently in the form of unrest and 'riots', looting, and destruction of property. For example, in 2005, around 5,000 people in Sydney, Australia, took part in disturbances, known as the Cronulla Riots, following reports of intimidatory behaviour by 'outsiders', said to be Middle Eastern youths, and the involvement of racist right-wing groups. Ethnic tensions fuelled by decaying infrastructure and housing led to unrest in French cities in late 2005, and, in the UK, neighbourhood disturbances occurred in Brixton, South London, in 1981, 1985 and 1995; in Ely, Cardiff, in 1991; in Oldham, Burnley, and Lidget Green, Bradford, in 2001; and in Birmingham in 2005.

Following the unrest in Bradford in 2001, the UK government commissioned a report which found a deep polarization between ethnic communities. It also argued that many aspects of people's everyday lives compounded this, including separate educational arrangements, voluntary bodies, employment patterns, places of worship and language (Cantle 2001). What this report and others show is that many 'riots', which are commonly seen as random acts of violence and destruction, arise from serious underlying social and economic problems that just need the trigger of a local event to spark protests. Attempts to tackle these underlying causes have become part of urban renewal programmes.

In August 2011, London was again the scene of major unrest, which spread to other major English cities such as Leeds, Derby, Nottingham and Manchester. A peaceful protest following the fatal shooting by police of a local man was the prelude to later attacks on the police, arson, and looting of shops, which continued over five consecutive nights and involved between 13,000 and 15,000 people. Five people died, more than 4,000 were arrested around the country, and some

1,700 were charged with criminal offences. Just over half of those appearing in court were between ten and twenty years old.

A government-commissioned report, *5 Days in August* (Riots Panel 2011), contained interviews with residents and victims and analysis of the available data. The report found that, although the fatal shooting in Tottenham was the trigger, no single cause explained the unrest. However, it did point to a strong link between social deprivation and urban unrest. For example, some 70 per cent of people arrested and brought before the courts lived in the most deprived areas of the country, and residents reported a widespread feeling that some young people 'had no hope and nothing to lose'. In some areas, relations between police and the public were very poor, and many complaints were noted about the 'inappropriate conduct' of police 'stop and search' procedures, particularly from black and Asian men, who were much more likely to be stopped and searched (ibid.: 12; Lewis and Newburn 2012). Concern about the collapse of morals and values was also reported, with many interviewees citing the size of bankers' bonuses, the scandal over MPs' expenses, consumer culture and a lack of personal responsibility as underlying causes.

There are some examples of coordinated action by city networks since the 1970s aimed at tackling some of these structural problems. In Europe, beginning in the 1970s recession, cities banded together to promote investment and generate new forms of employment. The Eurocities movement, encompassing more than 130 of Europe's largest cities, was formed in 1989 (with just six) to work with and influence EU policy. Asian cities such as Seoul, Singapore and Bangkok have also been effective economic actors, acknowledging the importance of speed of information about international markets and the need for flexible productive and commercial structures. Clearly, in spite of the many urban regeneration projects undertaken since the early 1980s, the multiple social problems of deprived inner-city areas continue to blight the lives of many citizens and remain a significant problem for governments and policy-makers.

See chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration', for a detailed discussion of multiculturalism and ethnic relations. Problems arising from inner-city decay are also covered in chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class', and chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

Urban renewal

In many industrialized economies, a range of national schemes have been introduced to try to revive the fortunes of the inner cities, but designing a successful urban renewal policy is challenging because it demands simultaneous action on multiple fronts.

In 1988, the UK Conservative government's 'Action for Cities' programme encouraged private investment and free-market forces to generate urban renewal. However, the response from business was weaker than anticipated, and, because of the seeming intractability of inner-city problems, the tendency has frequently been for programmes to be dropped when quick results do not materialize. *The Scarman Report* (Scarman 1982) into urban unrest in Brixton, London, in 1981 noted the lack of a coordinated approach to inner-city problems, and without major public expenditure the prospects for radical improvement are slender (MacGregor and Pimlott 1991).

The 1997 Labour government launched two main regeneration funds: the New Deal for Communities and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The New Deal for Communities (NDC) was Labour's flagship regeneration scheme for England; it was launched in 1998 and completed in 2010 after involving thirty-nine deprived neighbourhoods and 6,900 projects. The whole scheme cost £1.71 billion of public money and £730 million from public, private and volun-tary-sector sources, making it 'one of the most intensive and innovative area-based initiatives (ABIs) ever introduced in England' (Batty et al. 2010: 5). The

ten-year goal was to close the gap between these areas and the rest of the country by focusing on three *place-related* outcomes – crime, community and housing – along with three *people-related* ones – education, health and worklessness. But did it succeed?

The final evaluation report suggests that, in some places, it did. Residents reported they felt more positive about their neighbourhoods and were generally satisfied that the NDC partnerships had improved their areas. There were also improvements on a majority of indicators, including low-level crime, urban dereliction, the condition of housing, and mental health. However, the report noted little change in levels of worklessness, educational attainment, fear of becoming a victim of crime, or feeling that people could influence decision-making processes.

However, the 2008 financial crisis, the ensuing economic recession and government public spending cuts brought this programme to an end. The report's authors noted that 'It is not the best of times to be thinking of sustaining "post regeneration programme" activity' (Batty et al. 2010: 34). In many other cities, residential and retail projects were severely affected by the global 'credit crunch' of 2008, as major financial institutions tightened their lending criteria and withdrew funding. Restrictions on bank lending, alongside government austerity measures, led to a loss of confidence and many stalled developments.

Some cities construct medium- and long-term strategic plans to address the complex challenges before them. Under such plans, local government authorities, civic groups and private economic agents work together to refurbish the urban infrastructure, organize a world-class event or shift the employment base away from industrial enterprises to knowledge-based ones. Birmingham, Amsterdam, Lyons, Lisbon, Glasgow and Barcelona are examples of European cities that have carried out successful urban renewal projects with the help of strategic plans. The case of Barcelona is particularly noteworthy.

Launched in 1988, the Barcelona 2000 Economic and Social Strategic Plan brought together public and private organizations under a shared vision and action plan for transforming the city. The Barcelona municipal government and ten additional bodies (including the

chamber of commerce, the university, the city port authority and trade unions) oversaw the implementation of the plan's three main objectives: to connect Barcelona with a network of European cities by improving the communication and transport infrastructure, to improve the quality of life of the city's inhabitants, and to make the industrial and service sector more competitive while promoting promising new economic sectors.

One of the cornerstones was hosting the 1992 Olympic Games. Staging the Olympics allowed Barcelona to 'internationalize' itself, as its assets and vision were on display for the whole world to see. In the case of Barcelona, organizing a world-class event was crucial on two fronts: it enhanced the profile of the city in the eyes of the world and it generated additional enthusiasm within the city for completing the urban transformation (Borja and Castells 1997). London used its staging of the 2012 Olympic Games to promote an explicit and ambitious urban regeneration, including new rail lines, converting the athletes' village into housing and building five new neighbourhoods with some 8,000 people (Dugan 2013). Sporting events, it seems, can now play an important part in urban regeneration programmes (Taylor et al. 1996).

Clearly, questions remain about the effectiveness of regeneration schemes. How can top-down government programmes gain the backing and involvement of local people that is usually crucial to their success? Can public money really stimulate local economies and create jobs? And how can regeneration schemes prevent displacing problems from one area to another (Weaver 2001)? The experience of NDCs in England shows that, after ten years of activity and investment, the relevant neighbourhoods remained 'deprived areas', and solving the multiple problems of such urban regions will take much longer.

Gentrification and urban recycling

Urban recycling – the refurbishing or replacement of old buildings and new uses for previously developed land – has become common in large cities. Occasionally this has been attempted as part of planning programmes, but more often it is the result of gentrification – the transformation of a working-class or vacant area of the central city into residential and/or commercial use by the middle classes (Lees et al.

2008: xv). In blunt terms, it is the process through which 'wealthier people displace poorer people, and diversity is replaced by social and cultural homogeneity' (Lees et al. 2016: 9).

In the USA, Anderson (1990) analysed the impact of gentrification. While the renovation of a neighbourhood generally increases its value, it rarely improves the living standards of its current low-income residents, who are usually forced out. In the Philadelphia neighbourhood that Anderson studied, much of the housing was condemned, forcing more than 1,000 black people to leave. Although they were told that the clearances would open up a space to build modern, low-cost housing and that they would get the first opportunity to buy, in practice, large-scale business premises and a high school were built.

Gentrification can lead to economic revitalization, but it can just as effectively result in segregation and the exclusion of poorer residents.

Residents who stayed received some benefits in the form of improved schools and police protection, but the resulting increase in taxes and rents finally forced them to leave for more affordable neighbourhoods, often in areas of even greater social exclusion. Black residents interviewed by Anderson expressed resentment at the influx of 'yuppies', whom they held responsible for the changes. White newcomers had arrived in the city in search of cheap 'antique' housing, closer access to their city-centre jobs, and a trendy urban lifestyle. They professed to be 'open-minded' about racial and ethnic differences, but in reality little fraternizing took place between new and old residents unless they were of the same social class. Over time, the neighbourhood was gradually transformed into a white, middle-class enclave.

In London, Docklands was seen as a notable example of 'urban recycling'. The Docklands area in East London occupies 8.5 square miles adjoining the River Thames that lost its economic function when docks closed and industry declined. It is close to the financial district of the City of London but also adjoins poor working-class areas. Many living in or close to Docklands favoured redevelopment by means of community projects that would protect the interests of poorer residents. But, with the formation of the Docklands Development Corporation in 1981, the region became a central part of government strategy to drive 'regeneration' through private enterprise. Several researchers point out that governments often avoid the term 'gentrification', preferring the more positive 'regeneration'. In the USA, the term 'homesteading' was adopted in the 1970s, while, in the UK and elsewhere, 'renaissance', 'revitalization' or 'renewal' have also been adopted to 'disguise' the negative associations of gentrification (Lees et al. 2008: xxi).

An empirical study of gentrification in London, based on some 450 interviews with residents, including in the Docklands area, found that inner London has become a 'middle-class city', even though the middle classes remain in a minority (Butler and Robson 2003). The relaxation of planning constraints and regulations led to Docklands being covered in modern buildings, often adventurous in design. Warehouses have been converted into luxury flats, and new blocks have been constructed alongside them. Yet amid all this are dilapidated buildings and empty stretches of wasteland. The middle-class residents of Docklands were

certainly 'in the city' but were never 'of the city'; that is, gentrified areas were not integrated into the wider urban social context. And, in spite of many differences between the UK and the USA, the gentrification process leads to some broadly similar social consequences. For example, although London as a whole is one of the most multi-ethnic cities in the world, in its gentrified zones, the middle classes 'huddle together into essentially white settlements in the inner city. Their children, for the most part, like their parents, have friends just like themselves. Not a great surprise but perhaps a worrying sign for the future' (ibid.: 2).

Indeed, Atkinson and Bridge (2005) argue that gentrification has become a global process, as cities across the Global South become subject to similar kinds of urban development that have operated in the North. They see this as a new form of colonialism in which Western gentrification models spread outwards from the 'core' to the 'periphery'. However, scholars examining gentrification and urbanization in the Global South reject this view, which they see as the continuing use of concepts minted for use in Europe and North America being used in contexts where they may have limited purchase (Ley and Teo 2014). Lees et al. (2106) argue that, while gentrification may well be the 'leading edge of global urbanism', the process differs across societies. Hence, comparative studies must be a collegiate enterprise between experts and academics in both the Global North and the Global South.

If gentrification is becoming a global or 'planetary' process, it does not follow that it is uniform across all countries. Nonetheless, for those working from a broad political economy perspective, capitalist speculation on real estate and development in the urban built environment has become much more significant, particularly when rates of profit from industrial production are falling, and this shift is driving a global boom in property values. In the global economy, the process operates in both North and South, integrating financial and corporate interests with the power of states, pushing out residential communities to make way for more profitable developments (Merrifield 2013: 914–15).

Urbanization in the Global South

The world's urban population is forecast to reach almost 5 billion people by 2030, and the United Nations estimates that almost 4 billion of these will be residents of cities in the developing world. The number of cities of all types continues to grow, but the number of people living in the very largest cities has tripled since 1990 and constitutes around 12 per cent of the global urban population. As figure 13.2 shows, the UN forecasts that this pattern will continue into the future. Most megacities are in the developing countries of the Global South. China currently has six megacities and Latin America has four. India will have seven megacities by 2030 and Africa is forecast to have six, including Cairo, Kinshasa, Dar es Salaam and Luanda. In addition, as we have seen, most of the new, high-tech cities are planned for countries in the Global South.

Castells (1996b) refers to megacities as one of the main features of third millennium urbanization, referring to cities with populations over 10 million people. These are defined not by their size alone but also by their role as connection points between enormous human populations and the global economy. Megacities are intensely concentrated pockets of activity through which politics, media, communications, finances and production flow. According to Castells, they function as magnets for the countries or regions in which they are located. Besides serving as nodes in the global economy, megacities become 'depositories of all these segments of the population who fight to survive' (ibid.: 434). For example, Mumbai in India is a burgeoning employment and financial centre and home to the extraordinarily popular Bollywood film industry. It is a thriving and expanding city with exactly the kind of magnetic attraction that Castells talks about.
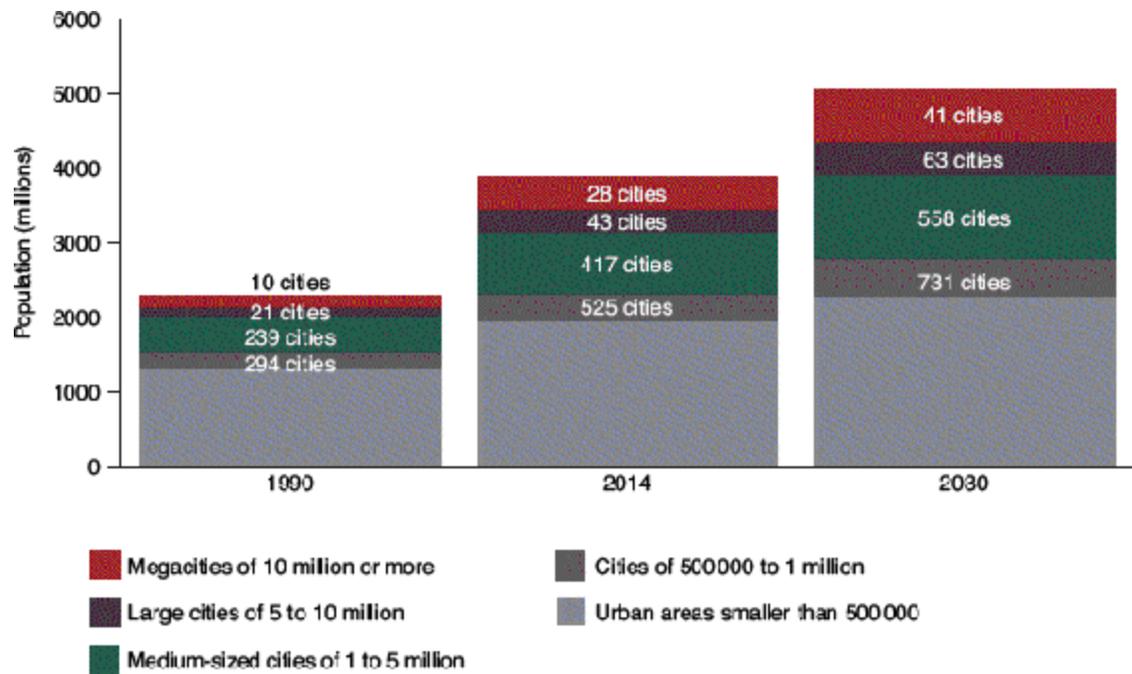
Figure 13.2 Global urban population by city size, 1990, 2014 and 2030 (projected)

Source: UN DESA (2014): 13.

Global society 13.2 The largest rural–urban migration in human history?

In the nineteenth century, urbanization and industrialization went hand in hand as the growing cities and urban regions of France, the USA, the UK and other early industrializing nations pulled in large numbers of people from agricultural communities and rural areas. In the twenty-first century, this pattern of migration from rural to urban has continued and is perhaps most striking in the case of China, which has pursued a policy of rapid urbanization as a way of creating and ensuring economic growth.

The journey from farm to city is the story of China's transformation from a poor and backward country to a global economic superpower. By 2030, when China's urban population is projected to swell to 1 billion, its cities will be home to one in every eight people on earth. How China's urban billion live will shape the future of the world....

Chongqing municipality is often wrongly called the world's largest city. It is actually a mostly rural city-province a little larger than Scotland, with a resident population of 28 million. Around one-quarter of these people live in the city proper, which is rapidly expanding to accommodate an enormous influx of new urban residents. By 2020, planners expect the city's population to top 12 million. A model of central Chongqing at the municipal planning centre shows a sea of skyscrapers and smart residential compounds dappled by green, verdant spaces. Accompanying captions confidently proclaim that six big cities, twenty-five smaller cities and 495 towns will surround the core megacity, 'just as many stars encircling the moon'....

In 2011, the country passed a development milestone: for the first time, more than half its citizens lived in towns or cities. The number of people in urban areas jumped to 691 million, taking China's urbanization ratio past 51 per cent. In the development stakes, that puts China many decades behind rich economies like the United

Kingdom and the United States, which became predominantly urban countries in 1851 and 1920 respectively. But China's urbanization process is occurring at a mind-boggling rate. In 1980, fewer than 200 million people lived in towns and cities. Over the next thirty years, China's cities expanded by nearly 500 million – the equivalent of adding the combined populations of the USA, the UK, France and Italy.

Source: Extracted from Miller (2012: 1–3).

THINKING CRITICALLY

Is the notion of a green city realizable? List some of the main obstacles to this goal in relation to housing, transport and roads, energy production and distribution, collection and disposal of waste, and green public spaces. Which obstacle is likely to be the most difficult to overcome?

The largest urban area in the world is the Pearl River Delta (PRD) in China. By 1995 it had already encompassed a population of 50 million people, and it is one of the most significant industrial, business and cultural centres of the century. The PRD is a collection of nine cities, including Shenzhen and Guangdong, which the World Bank has classified as surpassing Tokyo to become the world's largest megacity, with a population of 66 million people (Vaitheeswaran 2017).

Castells (1996a) points to several interrelated factors that explain the emergence of this enormous conurbation. First, China's ongoing economic transformation means that Hong Kong is one of the most important 'nodal points' linking China into the global economy. Second, between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s, industrialists initiated a dramatic process of industrialization within the Pearl River Delta, and by the mid-1990s more than 6 million people were employed in 20,000 factories and 10,000 firms. Finally, Hong Kong's role as a global business and financial centre has grown and its economic base is shifting away from manufacturing towards services. The result has been an 'unprecedented urban explosion'.

Why is the rate of urban growth in the world's less-developed regions so much higher than elsewhere? Rates of population growth are higher in the Global South and urban growth is fuelled by high fertility rates among people already living in cities. Second, there is widespread internal migration from rural areas into urban ones, as in the case of the developing Hong Kong–Guangdong megacity. People are drawn to cities in the Global South either because their systems of rural production have disintegrated or because urban areas offer better job opportunities. Rural poverty prompts many to try city life, and, though they may intend to migrate only for a relatively short time, most find themselves forced to stay, having lost their position in their previous communities.

See chapter 5, 'The Environment', for a discussion of the ecological consequences of population growth.

Challenges of urbanization

As a growing number of unskilled and agricultural workers migrate to urban centres, the formal economy struggles to absorb the influx into the workforce. In most cities in the Global South, it is the informal economy which enables those who cannot find formal work to survive. From casual work in manufacturing and construction to small-scale trading activities, the unregulated informal sector offers opportunities to poor or unskilled workers. However, the informal economy is also untaxed, unregulated and less productive than the formal economy, and many countries in the Global South lose much needed tax revenues.

The OECD estimates that a billion new jobs will be needed by 2025 to sustain the expected population growth in cities in the Global South. It is unlikely that all of these jobs will be created within the formal economy, and some development analysts argue that attention should

be paid to formalizing or regulating the large informal economy, where much of the 'excess' workforce is likely to cluster in the future.

Many of the rapidly expanding urban areas of the Global South also differ radically from cities in the North. Although cities everywhere face environmental problems, those in the Global South are confronted by particularly severe risks. Pollution, housing shortages, inadequate sanitation and unsafe water supplies are chronic problems. Cities such as Kolkata and São Paulo are highly congested, and the rate of internal migration is too high for the provision of permanent housing. Migrants crowd into shanty dwellings in squatters' zones, which mushroom around the edges of cities. This congestion and overdevelopment in city centres leads to serious environmental problems such as the loss of 'green spaces' and pollution from vehicles and industrial areas.

Globalization presents important opportunities for expanding urban areas in the Global South. With economic integration, cities are able to enter international markets, to promote themselves as locations for investment and development, and to create economic links across the borders of nation-states. Globalization presents one of the most dynamic openings for growing urban centres to become major forces in economic development and innovation. Indeed, many cities in the Global South have already joined the ranks of the world's 'global cities'.

Yet in many urban areas of the Global South, poverty is widespread and existing social services cannot meet the demands for healthcare, family planning advice, education and training. The larger proportion of young people in countries of the Global South, in comparison with the industrialized countries, also creates social problems. A youthful population needs support and education, but many countries lack the resources to provide universal education. However, although birth rates remain high in many countries, they are forecast to fall in the future, feeding into a gradual decrease in the rapid rate of urbanization. Urbanization in the Global South illustrates something of the 'high-risk, high-opportunity' world we see emerging today. While globalization opens up many positive opportunities, there is a real risk that, in the rush for rapid urban development, governments may take on unsustainable levels of debt that would threaten to derail the entire project.

Smog is a persistent problem in large cities across the world, often exceeding globally agreed limits. As China went into lockdown in early 2020 as a result of the spread of Covid-19, it was predicted that the epidemic might paradoxically save thousands of lives through the improvement in air quality as a result of the stoppage of factories and road travel.

Population growth is discussed chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change', chapter 5, 'The Environment', and chapter 6, 'Global Inequality'.

Urban infrastructure

In the twenty-first century, urban studies has seen a growing 'infrastructural turn', in which numerous studies have drawn attention

to the enormously complex, varied and extensive infrastructural networks on which cities depend for the supply of services such as water and energy, transportation, and urban waste management and disposal. 'Infrastructure' may immediately appear as obvious and even uninteresting to sociologists. Yet, Amin and Thrift (2017: 68–9) suggest it is anything but – infrastructure is not passive or dead, but 'lively'.

> The way the world turns up should be a matter of wonder. Think of the myriad interactions that mean things appear on the doorstep or in supermarkets, at least in certain parts of the world. Or the fact that the lights stay on and fresh water flows through the taps. Or the way that we are able to travel from A to B without too much hassle. It is almost impossible to conjure up the existential complexity – and the corresponding fragility – of the bedrock of civilization that is infrastructure.

This shift of focus connects the material reality of the city with social relations through the varied ways in which urban residents actually experience the urban environment. There are large differences across types of city, especially between the industrial cities of the Global North and those of the Global South.

In the Global South, where the urban infrastructure can be unreliable at best, the vulnerability of all those invisible networks of pipes, cables, generating plants and workers to disruption is in the foreground of city life. However, in the industrialized countries, precisely because these systems tend to be hidden and more reliable, people normally live without giving much thought to what enables them to enjoy the city. As Graham (2010: 2) argues, 'because they rely on the continuous agency of infrastructure to eat, wash, heat, cook, light, work, travel, communicate, and remove dangerous or poisonous wastes from their living place, urbanites often have few or no real alternatives when the complex infrastructures that sometimes manage to achieve this are removed or disrupted.' Disasters such as earthquakes and floods, or more prosaic disruptions such as the clogging of sewage pipes by an excess of fat from restaurants and households or urgent transport repairs, serve to bring the urban infrastructure out of its normal invisibility.

Many urban sociologists connect studies of the construction and maintenance of the urban material infrastructure to social and political inequalities (Graham and McFarlane 2015). For example, some social groups are excluded from certain infrastructural features, while others enjoy privileged access. In the USA, legal action was taken in 1978–9 by residents in Houston, Texas, who were opposed to the proposed siting of a landfill site near their homes. Robert Bullard studied the location of waste facilities and found that, since the 1930s, some 82 per cent of all waste in Houston had been dumped in black residential areas, despite black people making up just 25 per cent of the population (Lakhani 2019). This case introduced the concept of 'environmental racism', which forms part of the wider environmental justice movement (Bullard 1993). In 2009, many informal settlements in Mumbai, India, saw intensified police raids that were aimed at destroying their water connections following a disappointing monsoon season in order to protect the water supply for middle-class communities in wealthier parts of the city (Graham et al. 2015).

What we may conclude from examples such as these is that urban infrastructural development is not simply a neutral matter of administration and city planning but is always bound up with social inequalities and political struggles, including the formation of urban social movements.

Sustainable cities

In his famous essay 'Urbanism as a Way of Life', Louis Wirth (1938: 1–2) argued that 'Nowhere has mankind been farther removed from organic nature than under the conditions of life characteristic of great cities'. Yet, while the discipline of sociology has done much to identify the dynamics of urban development and the social problems associated with city living, until recently it paid scant regard to the impact of cities on the natural environment.

For many within the environmental movement, cities demonstrate in an acute way exactly what is wrong with modern societies. Edward Goldsmith (1988) argued that industrialization had given rise to a 'surrogate world' (Harvey's 'created environment') of material goods,

buildings and technological devices which can only be built from 'the real world' of the global biosphere. Resources extracted from the natural world are transformed into roads, housing and commodities, but, in the process, topsoils are covered in asphalt, forests are destroyed to make room for factories and housing estates, and the generation and disposal of waste pollutes the environment.

Even the apparently benign technology of the internet turns out to be completely dependent on polluting energy industries. The global expansion of the internet makes the worldwide web an increasingly heavy user of electricity. To function at all, the internet depends on fossil fuel extraction, refinement, transportation and use just as much as any other technological device. Internet users typing into Google to search the web are probably aware neither of the vast 'server farms' the company has built to handle their requests nor of the energy demands these make.

Estimates suggest that, in 2016, Google owned around 2.5 million servers in its fifteen data centre campuses, eight of which were in the USA, four in Europe, two in Asia and one in South America. These centres process 40 million searches per second, 1.2 trillion per year (Data Center Knowledge 2017). In 2015, the energy use of Google's parent company, Alphabet, stood at around 5.7 terawatt hours (TWh), with Google itself using the bulk of this (1 terawatt is equivalent to 1 trillion watts). On 2018 figures, this was double the energy use of Nigeria (28 TWh), more than that of Portugal (49 TWh) and Romania (50 TWh), and just short of that of the Czech Republic (59 TWh) (Enerdata 2019). Google claims to be a carbon-neutral company, as it offsets its 'dirty' energy use by buying an equivalent amount of renewable energy. However, this means that the company still uses polluting fossil fuels in order to power its operations, and critics say it is therefore 'carbon-neutral' in only a 'theoretical sense' (Geuss 2018).

For many environmentalists, the modern city is akin to a huge beast, devouring energy, water and oxygen while giving out large quantities of noxious gases, sewage and other pollutants that have to go somewhere, usually into landfill, the atmosphere or waterways and oceans. The American ecologist Eugene Odum (1989: 17) described the city as 'a parasite … since it makes no food, cleans no air, and cleans very little

water to a point where it could be reused.' This may have been tolerable with very few 'beasts' or 'parasites', but continuing urbanization meant that, by 2018, there were thirty-three megacities in the world, 467 cities with populations between 1 and 5 million inhabitants, and another 598 with between 500,000 and 1 million people. By 2030, on current projections, there will be 706 cities with over 1 million people (UN DESA 2018: 2). Cohen (2017: 3) argues that 'With more than seven billion people on the planet and a likely maximal population of nine billion or ten billion, it is not possible to design and build human settlements that are in perfect harmony with nature.' Yet Goldsmith's solution is a simple one: deindustrialization and the decentralization of cities. Given the sheer size of the global human population, is this even a realistic proposition?

It seems unlikely, for several reasons. First, large-scale movement of people into the countryside would probably mean more environmental damage, not less, as human populations and their attendant pollution spread into new areas, swallowing up more land in the process (Lewis 1994). Second, the infrastructure of cities may actually be less damaging to the natural environment than small communities in rural areas. For example, public transport in cities tends to be less polluting per head of population than individual car use in rural areas. A denser city population actually makes public transport more efficient and less polluting (Banister 1992). In this sense, environmental sustainability and enhanced city resilience to potential crises, such as energy disruption or natural disasters, may be seen as complementary (Pearson et al. 2014). The more compact character of cities also enables more widespread use of environmentally benign transport forms such as bicycles – and even plain old walking. Conversely, many rural dwellers insist their private cars are real necessities. Finally, the myriad collective housing projects and high-rise developments of modern cities are more capable of accommodating the large human population than housing types typical of the suburbs.

Rather than giving up on cities altogether, as some radical environmentalists argued in the past, there is a growing interest in modifying and transforming them into eco-cities, 'smart cities', or simply sustainable cities. A sustainable city is one that aims to

minimize its inputs of energy and resources and to reduce its outputs of pollutants and waste products. In simple terms, the aim is to find that form of human settlement that has the least impact on the environment (Cohen 2017). The concept offers the enticing prospect of maintaining the freedoms, opportunities and cultural diversity of city living while protecting the natural world from increasing damage, and thus contributing to the wider project of sustainable development (Haughton and Hunter 2003; Jenks and Jones 2009).

See chapter 5, 'The Environment', for more on sustainable development.

Urban sustainability requires changing from *linear* to *circular* flows of materials and goods. Simple examples are recycling waste, rather than dumping it into landfill or incinerating it, and recycling domestic 'grey' (used) water by using it to flush toilets or water garden plants. In this way a circular process is created which becomes less ecologically damaging and more sustainable (Mega 2010). This logic can be embedded within businesses and local authorities, which can use eco-audits to build in eco-efficiency and design to all their activities.

Micro power generation at household and community levels, using renewable technologies such as solar cells and wind turbines, reduces CO_2 emissions and airborne pollutants, while shifting public and private transport towards electric hybrids or biofuels improves the quality of the urban environment. Intensifying the use of 'brownfield' (previously used) land to preserve the surrounding countryside, redesigning city space to create a pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, and introducing more bikeways and 'light' transit routes to encourage alternatives to the private car are all elements of the sustainable city project (Jenks and Jones 2009: 3).

Sustainable urban development also demands active, environmentally knowledgeable and committed citizens who are prepared to change

their routine, habitual everyday actions to improve the quality of city life. Advocates of sustainability argue that decentralizing decision-making to the local level is a crucial way of increasing citizen participation and involvement in the project of reducing the city's ecological footprint.

However, cities across the world are not uniform but very diverse in scale, population size, the state of their industrial development, and, therefore, the types of challenges they face moving towards sustainability. In the Global South, the main problems are consumptionoriented ones such as how to deal with waste and issues of traffic congestion and pollution, but, in many former communist countries of Eastern Europe, pollution from industrial production remains the most pressing problem at hand. China has some of the most polluted cities in the world, while most countries in the Global South have cross-cutting problems of industrial pollution, poorly maintained basic infrastructure, increasing traffic problems and a lack of service provision (Haughton and Hunter 2003: 7–8). Sustainable initiatives need to be sensitive to this diversity and uneven development.

Like the concept of sustainable development itself, ideas of sustainable cities are ambitious, even utopian. Yet it is possible to envisage the *process of change* itself as an 'active utopia' (Bauman 1976), motivating people to become involved even though there may be no real endpoint to the process. And, though there are serious obstacles to be overcome, cities and urban areas, and therefore the experience of modernity itself, may well look and feel very different in the future.

[The city in a global era](#)

A majority of people on the planet now live urban lives in cities and city regions, though the extent to which they experience the city uniformly in the ways described by Simmel, Wirth or Marshall Berman is debatable. Today's urban sociology is much more aware of the varieties of urban form and experience, particularly between the Global North and the Global South. Longstanding issues of urban poverty and inequality have not disappeared; in some ways they have become even more pressing as gentrification has become a more significant engine of corporate profitability. What role is there for local and city authorities, in collaboration with businesses, investors, government bodies, civic associations, professional groups, trade unions and others, in shaping cities for the better?

Global society 13.3 Sustainable cities from scratch

China is experiencing rapid and large-scale urbanization – and the resulting local and global urban environmental challenges are unprecedented…. At the local level, many urban areas are creating 'eco-city' developments, which aim to introduce new standards, technologies, and low-carbon lifestyles. More than one hundred eco-city initiatives have been launched in recent years in China.

The new World Bank Report, called *Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City: A Case Study of an Emerging Eco-City in China*, reviews one such initiative. 'Addressing the environmental sustainability of cities is a critical development challenge facing China right now – not only locally but also in terms of Chinese cities' global carbon footprint. Given the recent prominence of various "eco-city" initiatives, we wanted to analyze one such case in greater detail to extract some practical lessons learned which may be relevant for others,' says Axel Baeumler, the World Bank's Senior Infrastructure Economist and leader of the study.

The Sino-Singapore Tianjin Eco-City envisages an 'economically sustainable, socially harmonious, environmentally friendly and resourceconserving' city which will become a 'model eco and low carbon city replicable by other cities in China'. The Tianjin Eco-City is a new development area being designed for 350,000 residents on the perimeter of the Binhai New Area. The 'Sino-Singapore' part of the name refers to the project's design and financing partners.

One notable feature of the Tianjin Eco-City is that it sets explicit sustainability targets by 2020, including (i) limiting carbon emissions per unit of GDP; (ii) ensuring that all buildings are Green Buildings; (iii) having a share of Green Trips (i.e., walking, cycling, or the use of public transport) that exceeds 90 percent; and (iv) receiving at least 50 percent of its water from non-conventional sources. If achieved, these ambitious targets would indeed point to greater environmental sustainability. However, the report finds that

many implementation challenges need to be addressed in such projects, including:

- ensuring that land use plans and corresponding detailed urban designs are conducive to supporting Green Trips;

- incentivizing green building construction at efficiency standards that are higher than those prevailing at the provincial or national level;

- complementing technological solutions with adequate economic incentives to direct new urban development towards sustainability; and

- ensuring that these new urban developments will remain affordable and socially inclusive.

Source: World Bank (2011b).

THINKING CRITICALLY

In absolute terms, China is the world's largest electricity producer. Yet China's electricity consumption per capita is far lower than that of many nations with smaller populations. In Mwh per capita, Iceland consumes 53.9, Norway 23.7, Australia 9.9 and China just 4.3. Do some research on electricity production and consumption. Start with the International Energy Agency: http://energyatlas.iea.org/. Some critics see Tianjin Eco-City as an 'ideological' project designed to mask China's poor environmental record. Is this criticism fair?

Creating sustainable cities means not only designing infrastructure to contribute to greener forms of travel, such as bus and cycle lanes, but also encouraging citizens to change their routines.

Borja and Castells (1997) argue that there are three main realms in which local authorities can act effectively to manage global forces. First, cities can contribute to economic productivity and competitiveness by managing the local 'habitat' – the conditions and facilities that form the social base for economic productivity. Competitiveness depends on a qualified workforce, and this requires a strong educational system, good public transport, adequate and affordable housing, capable law enforcement, effective emergency services and vibrant cultural resources.

Second, cities play an important role in ensuring socio-cultural integration within diverse multi-ethnic populations. Global cities bring together individuals from many countries, varying religious and linguistic backgrounds, and different socio-economic levels. If the intense pluralism found within cosmopolitan cities is not countered by forces of integration, then fragmentation and intolerance can result. However, in cases where the effectiveness of the nation-state in promoting social cohesion is compromised, the voluntary associations and governance structures within cities can be positive forces for social integration.

Third, cities are important venues for political representation and management. Local authorities have two advantages over the nation-state: they generally enjoy greater legitimacy with those they represent and they have more flexibility and room for manoeuvre. Many citizens feel that national politics no longer represents their interests and concerns. In cases where the nation-state is too distant to represent specific cultural or regional interests, city and local authorities are more accessible forums for political activity.

Globalization and continuing urbanization make city and urban authorities more significant, opening up new opportunities for them to play a revitalized political and economic role. For instance, there are now many city mayors with significant political power and access to resources, enabling them to shape future development. And, as many people see national governments as too remote from the local issues and problems affecting their areas, strengthening city governance may prove to be a more effective way to address the city's chronic and novel problems.

❓ [Chapter review](#)

1. What is meant by urbanization? How was early urbanization linked to the process of industrialization?

2. In what ways does the urbanization process in many countries in the Global South differ from that in European countries and North America? How has urbanization developed in China and India?

3. Provide a definition of a 'global city'. What features and functions mark out global cities as different from other cities?

4. The Chicago School adopted an ecological approach to urban studies. Which concepts derived from natural ecological studies are used to explore urban life?

5. Outline Georg Simmel's key ideas in his famous essay 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'. Is Simmel's characterization of the urban personality still recognizable today?

6. In Louis Wirth's thesis of 'urbanism as a way of life', secondary contacts are seen as significant. What are they and why are they important for understanding city life?

7. How does David Harvey connect processes of urban restructuring to broad socio-economic changes? In what ways does Harvey's approach differ from that of the Chicago School?

8. How are inner-city decay and suburbanization tied together? Is it inevitable that suburban growth contributes to problems in city centres?

9. Define 'urban recycling' and 'gentrification' and provide some examples. Why do some see gentrification as damaging to the diverse fabric of urban life?

10. What is meant by a 'smart city' and a 'sustainable city'? Is it realistic to try to modify existing cities in a sustainable direction? Are smart cities necessarily sustainable too?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

National governments and city authorities around the world increasingly recognize that global warming must be tackled more systematically than in the recent past. One of the thorniest problems is how to make changes to metropolitan infrastructure and urban lifestyles to render them more sustainable. Which adaptations are likely to significantly reduce CO_2 emissions quickly? Should metropolitan regions focus on transport systems or housing? Should recycling initiatives and reducing solid waste take precedence? These are difficult choices for local and city authorities with limited financial resources that may already be under pressure.

The journal article below evaluates a Municipal Climate Change Policy that was introduced in São Paulo, a Brazilian megacity, in 2009. Read the piece carefully, take notes, then answer the questions that follow.

Di Giulio, G. M., Bedran-Martins, A. M. B., Vasconcellos, M. P., Ribeiro, W. C., and Lemos, M. C. (2018) 'Mainstreaming Climate Adaptation in the Megacity of São Paulo, Brazil', *Cities*, 72: 237–44; https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2017.09.001.

1. What kind of research study is this? What sources have been used?

2. Why has São Paulo tended to focus on 'mitigation' of the likely consequences of climate change rather than adaptation to it? What are the forecast consequences of global warming for this city?

3. What have been the main foci of São Paulo's attempts to reduce CO_2 emissions? According to the authors, only one aspect of the plan has been implemented. What is this and why has there been more success in this than other aspects?

4. '… although people in São Paulo recognize the effects of climate change, climate issues are not a high priority for most of them.' Why not?

5. What can sociologists and governments learn from the experience, so far, of São Paulo? From this single research paper, what would

you say are the most serious obstacles to climate change adaptation in cities and urban areas?

⚙️ **Thinking it through**

As urbanization continues apace, we may assume that urbanism has become the way of life for increasing numbers of people. Louis Wirth argued that, wherever modern urbanism takes hold, the social bonds of kinship and community are eroded or made ineffective. As urban development spreads outwards beyond the central city space into the suburbs and beyond, it takes with it the same transport systems, secondary contacts, congestion and instrumentally rational mentality. Read Wirth's original 1938 essay here:

www.sjsu.edu/people/saul.cohn/courses/city/s0/27681191Wirth.pdf.

As the latest city-planning trend, the smart city, begins to find real-world applications, how might these change the typical ways of urban life? Do some online research on the kind of initiatives and technological innovations that characterize smart city ideas, thinking about how their widespread adoption will impact on urban social bonds, community life and even the ubiquitous secondary contacts. For instance, which jobs and types of work may disappear in the smart city? Are smart cities purely for the wealthy social classes? Will the Internet of Things, writ large, erode even the loose sociability involved in Wirth's notion of the secondary contact? Imagine a city mayor has asked you to write a short summary of how smart city technologies might affect their urban communities. Write a 750-word briefing laying out what you see as the major advantages and disadvantages of the smart city.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

A renewed interest in the infrastructure of cities has been sparked by the digital revolution in communications and its application to all manner of devices and systems in urban environments. Collectively such applications have been discussed under the rubric of the smart city. Many discussions of smart infrastructure planning focus on the positive aspects of heightened surveillance and the coordination of activities enabled by this shift. Alternatively, critical sociological studies raise concerns about the potentially intensified monitoring, policing and control of city populations.

Liam Young, a self-styled 'speculative architect and film-maker', explores present and futuristic urban scenarios in his performance lectures, videos and other work. For examples, see www.dezeen.com/tag/liam-young/. In a lecture performance/video in Montreal (2018), Young presented *City Everywhere*, which looks at the underpinnings of smart cities and their technologies in the mines and salt flats that produce the gold, cobalt and lithium that power the digital revolution, all seen from the windows of a virtual driverless taxi and drones. Watch *City Everywhere* at www.youtube.com/watch?v=rE_c0hmx9Fg.

Given the mixture of documentary footage and speculative scenarios, is it clear which aspects of the film are 'real' and which are 'speculation'? Does it matter? This presentation could have taken the form of a conventional lecture with additional images and illustrative video clips. What does the addition of a musical score, story-telling narrative and filmic scenes add to the presentation? As sociologists interested in social inequalities and global warming, do we learn anything new from the film about the potential of smart cities to tackle these issues?

Further reading

To get an overview of the field of urban sociology, Mark Abrahamson's (2014) *Urban Sociology: A Global Introduction* (New York: Cambridge University Press) is excellent, with lots of case studies. Then, for an interactionist perspective on urbanism, try David A. Karp, Gregory P. Stone, William C. Yoels and Nicholas P. Dempsey's (2015) *Being Urban: A Sociology of City Life* (3rd edn, Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO), which is a very good account.

For a critical overview and assessment of urban theories, see Alan Harding and Talja Blokland's (2014) *Urban Theory: A Critical Introduction to Power, Cities and Urbanism in the 21st Century* (London: Sage). For ideas on the sustainable city, Steven Cohen's (2017) *The Sustainable City* (New York: Columbia University Press) is a good place to start.

Key debates on cities, old and new, are covered in Richard T. LeGates and Frederic Stout's edited collection *The City Reader* (6th edn, London: Routledge). Finally, Jan Lin and Christopher Mele's (2012) *The Urban Sociology Reader* (2nd edn, Abingdon: Routledge) is a collection of classic and contemporary pieces and a useful resource.

For a collection of original readings on urban environments, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Centre for Urban History, based at the University of Leicester, UK:
www.le.ac.uk/urbanhist/

H-Urban – a discussion forum for urban history and urban studies:
https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban

Globalization and World Cities Network, based at Loughborough University, UK – focuses on relations between cities in the global economy:
www.lboro.ac.uk/gawc/world2012t.html

City Mayors – a useful resource on mayors across the world:
www.citymayors.com/

Virtual Cities Resource Centre – looks at urban form as represented on the worldwide web:
www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/planning/virtualcities.html

A European site dedicated to promoting sustainable cities:
www.sustainablecities.eu/

CHAPTER 14

THE LIFE COURSE

CONTENTS

Over the second half of the twentieth century, adults in the developed countries shared a similar set of general expectations about how their children's lives would develop. Most expected their children to have a good education, gain qualifications and find work. Many expected their children would have well-paid careers, be healthier and generally 'do better' in life than they themselves had done. In some countries, such as the UK, it was expected that young people would be able to afford to own their own home and, based on reliable evidence, that life expectancy would continue to rise. Children could look forward to a long, healthy life and a comfortable retirement.

Today, this picture of continuous progression over time appears overly optimistic. In the developed world, a new discourse has arisen around the issue of intergenerational equity – that is, fairness and justice

across the generations in relation to treatment by social institutions, opportunities for advancement and access to resources. Particular concerns have been raised about work and the types of jobs available, incomes resulting from less well-paid work in the gig economy, poorer pension provision for retirement, a lack of housing and falling levels of property ownership among younger generations, and the state of the natural environment as global warming proceeds. As a recent UK report argues, societies need to do more to prepare for the '100 year life':

> One in three of today's babies will live to see their 100th birthday. This stark demographic fact, whilst being a positive reflection of modern lifestyles and technology, has profound implications for our working lives. The three-stage model of life created in the twentieth century of 'education, work, retirement' is no longer suitable with the prospect of careers that may span over 60 years. (House of Lords 2019: 37)

Paradoxically, the extended average lifespan that has been achieved over the last seventy-five years or so has also been a trigger for concerns about intergenerational fairness. Older generations are seen as having benefited from good pensions, high property values and state benefits, while younger generations face insecure employment, austerity politics, less generous pension provision, and the rising costs associated with an ageing population. In short, as the social landscape changes, the typical life course for young people is set to be very different from that of their older relatives.

A simple way of understanding the course of an individual life is to see it as *a path or journey*, with many twists and turns, though it can also be understood as a series of *discrete events*, such as getting married or divorced, the death of a loved one, getting a good job and having children. This 'event history' suggests another possibility, that of examining a life in terms of constantly *changing relationships*. Yet, as the debates on generational equity show, an individual's life story is inevitably influenced and partly shaped by *the society* of which they are a part. The world in which recent generations find themselves is very different from that of their grandparents' and even their parents' generation, as are the processes and agencies of socialization through which people develop and learn.

As we will see later, socialization connects the different generations to one another and, though the process of learning is most intense in infancy and early childhood, learning and adjustment go on throughout life. The concept of the [life course](#) is designed to help us capture this variation in life stages, generational experience and shifting social conditions. Following an introduction to socialization and sociological ideas on the formation of the 'social self', the chapter explores how adopting a life course approach can help us to understand the observed differences between generations. First, we shall examine the main theoretical interpretations put forward to explain how and why children develop as they do, including theories that explain the development of gender identities. We then move on to discuss the life course and its changing phases before looking at the ageing or 'greying' of the global population and its consequences. We end the chapter with a discussion of some important sociological issues around death, dying and bereavement.

Self-formation and socialization

Theories of child development

During the first months of life, infants possess little or no understanding of the difference between human beings and material objects in the environment and no awareness of their 'self'. Indeed, children do not begin to use concepts such as 'I', 'me', 'you' or 'they' until around the age of two or later. Only gradually do they then come to understand that other people have distinct identities, consciousness and needs that are separate from their own. Yet one of the distinctive features of human beings compared to other animals is that human individuals are *self-aware*. So how does this self-awareness develop?

Classic studies 14.1 George Herbert Mead – *Mind, Self and Society*

The research problem

Many scholars have suggested that human beings are the only creatures who know they exist and that eventually they will die. Sociologically, this means that adults are *self-aware*. But is this self-awareness innate or is it learned? Is it a research problem for psychologists rather than sociologists? The American sociologist and philosopher George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) insisted that the self is a social creation which requires a sociological perspective if we are to understand how it emerges and develops.

Mead's explanation

Since Mead's ideas formed the main basis of the sociological tradition of symbolic interactionism they have had a very broad impact in sociology. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes that interaction between human beings takes place through symbols and the interpretation of meanings (see chapters 1 and 3). But Mead's work also provides an account of the main phases of child development, paying particular attention to the emergence of a sense of self.

According to Mead, infants and young children first of all develop as *social* beings by imitating the actions of those around them – for example, through play, where young children often imitate what adults do. A child will make mud pies, having seen an adult cooking, or dig with a spoon having observed someone gardening. Children's play evolves from simple imitation to more complicated games in which a child of four or five years old will act out an adult role. Mead called this step 'taking the role of the other' – learning what it is like to be in the shoes of another person. It is only at this stage that children begin to acquire a developed sense of self. Children achieve an understanding of themselves as separate agents – as a 'me' – by seeing themselves through the eyes of others.

We achieve self-awareness when we learn to distinguish the 'me' from the 'I'. The 'I' is the unsocialized infant, a bundle of spontaneous wants and desires. The 'me', as Mead used the term, is the social self. Individuals develop self-consciousness by coming to see themselves as others see them, which allows for an 'internal conversation' between the individual 'I' and the social 'me'.

Children's play is a crucial part of developing a social self.

A further stage of child development occurs when the child is about eight or nine years old. This is when children tend to take part in

more organized games rather than in unsystematic play. It is in this period that they begin to understand the overall values and *morality* according to which social life is conducted. To learn organized games, children must understand the rules of play and notions of fairness and equal participation. At this stage they learn to grasp what Mead termed the generalized other – the general values and moral rules of the culture in which they are developing.

Critical points

Mead's theory of the social self has been criticized on several grounds. First, some argue that it effectively eliminates all biological influences on the development of the self, when it is clear from biology and neuroscience that there *is* such a biological basis. However, this criticism appears not to recognize that Mead's notion of the 'I' represents the biological organism or 'unsocialized infant'. Second, Mead's theory seems to rely on the 'I' and the 'me' working cooperatively to ensure the smooth functioning of the self. But this downplays the internal tensions and conflicts experienced by people and which Freud and Chodorow's theories seem better able to explain (see below). Mead also has little to say about the effects of unbalanced power relationships on children's development. Finally, and again unlike Freud, Mead's explanation has no room for the unconscious mind as a motive force in human behaviour and consequently lacks the concept of 'repression', which has proved essential to psychoanalytic practice.

Contemporary significance

Mead's work was the first genuinely sociological theory of self-formation and development. He insisted that, if we are properly to understand ourselves, we must begin, not with a mythical isolated individual, but with the social process of human interactions. In this way he showed that the self is not an innate part of our biology, nor does it emerge simply with the developing human brain. What Mead demonstrated is that the study of the individual's self cannot be divorced from the study of society and that requires a sociological perspective.

Although Freud's approach to the human psyche perhaps overshadowed Mead's during the twentieth century, at least in relation to the treatment of mental disorders, symbolic interactionism continues to produce insightful findings from a perspective rooted in Mead's sociological ideas. And, in this sense, Mead's ideas still have much to offer sociologists.

This problem has been much debated and is viewed rather differently in contrasting theoretical perspectives and disciplines. To some extent, this is because the most prominent theories about child development emphasize different aspects of socialization.

Jean Piaget and the stages of cognitive development

Socialization does not involve passive recipients and active educators, as even young children select and interpret what they see. Jean Piaget (1896–1980) worked on many aspects of child development but is best known for his ideas on cognition – the ways in which children learn to think about themselves and their environment. Piaget emphasized the developing child's active capability to make sense of their world and described the successive stages of cognitive development during which children learn the necessary skills to think about themselves and their environment (Piaget 1951, 1957).

Piaget's first stage, from birth to about the age of two, is the sensorimotor stage. Infants learn mainly by touching objects, manipulating them and physically exploring their environment. Until the age of about four months, infants cannot differentiate themselves from their environment. For example, a child will not realize that their own movements cause the sides of the cot to rattle. They gradually learn to distinguish people from objects, coming to see that both have an existence independent of their immediate perception. The main accomplishment of this stage is that children understand their environment to have distinct and stable properties.

The pre-operational stage follows, lasting from around the ages of two to seven years. Here, children acquire a mastery of language and are able to use words to represent objects and images in a symbolic fashion. A four-year-old might use a sweeping hand, for example, to

represent the concept 'aeroplane'. This stage is 'pre-operational' because children are not yet able to use their developing mental capabilities systematically. Children in this stage are also egocentric, interpreting the world exclusively in terms of their own position. Holding a book upright, a child may ask about a picture in it, not realizing that the person opposite can only see the back of the book. They also have no general understanding of categories that adults take for granted, such as the concepts causality, speed, weight or number.

A third period, the concrete operational stage, lasts from the ages of around seven to eleven years, when children master abstract, logical notions and are able to handle ideas such as causality without much difficulty. A child will now recognize the false reasoning involved in the idea that a wide container holds less water than a thin, narrow one, even though the water levels are different. They become capable of carrying out the mathematical operations of multiplying, dividing and subtracting and are much less egocentric.

The years from eleven to fifteen cover what Piaget called the formal operational stage. During adolescence, the developing child is able to grasp abstract and hypothetical ideas. When faced with a problem, children at this stage are able to review all the possible ways of solving it and go through them in order to reach a solution. They also understand 'trick questions'. According to Piaget, the first three stages of development are universal; but not all adults reach the fourth, formal operational stage. The development of formal operational thought depends in part on schooling. Adults of limited educational attainment will continue to think in more concrete terms and remain more egocentric.

The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1986 [1934]) provided a useful critique of Piaget's ideas, arguing that the processes of learning which Piaget describes are not human universals but are dependent on social structures and interactions. Vygotsky saw that the opportunities for learning available to children from various social groups differed considerably and that this strongly influenced their ability to learn from their engagements with the outside world. In short, learning and cognitive development are not immune from the social structures within which they are embedded. Just as these structures constrain

some groups and enable others to become wealthy, so they also constrain and enable children's cognitive development.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> How far do Mead's and Piaget's ideas fit with your own memories of growing up? What examples can you think of that might support Mead's contention that the self develops through social interactions and is not innate?

Agencies of socialization

Socialization refers to the processes through which human infants become self-aware, knowledgeable members of society. Socialization of the young allows for the more general phenomenon of social reproduction, through which societies achieve structural continuity over time. All societies have characteristics, including specific languages, that endure over many generations.

Sociologists often speak of socialization as occurring in two broad phases involving a number of different agencies. Agencies of socialization are groups or social contexts in which significant socialization occurs. Primary socialization occurs in infancy and childhood and is the most intense period of cultural learning. It is the time when children learn language and the basic behavioural patterns that form the foundation for later learning. The family is the main agent of socialization during this phase. Secondary socialization takes place later in childhood and into maturity. Schools, peer groups, organizations, the media and, eventually, the workplace become socializing forces for individuals. Social interactions in these contexts help people learn the values, norms and beliefs that make up the patterns of their culture.

In developed societies, most primary socialization occurs within a small-scale family context, and children spend their early years within the domestic unit. In many other cultures, by contrast, aunts, uncles and grandparents are often part of a single household and serve as caretakers, even for very young infants. Yet even within modern

societies there are many variations in family structures. Some children are brought up in single-parent households or same-sex households, and others are cared for by two 'mothering' and 'fathering' agents in their divorced parents and step-parents.

We look at issues concerning families in more detail in chapter 15, 'Families and Intimate Relationships'.

Another important early socializing agency is the school, which educates children and prepares them for work and future life course stages. Peer groups, often formed in school, consist of children of a similar age. In some small-scale societies, peer groups are formalized as age-grades and are normally confined to males. Ceremonies or rites mark the transition of males from one age-grade to another, and those within a particular age-grade generally maintain close and friendly connections throughout life. Hunt (2017: 19–20) notes that male Aborigines in Australia traditionally graduated through the grades of 'the hunter' and 'the warrior', and on until they become tribal 'elders'. Here, social status is largely based on age categories.

The family's importance in socialization is obvious, but it is less clear just how significant peer groups are. Yet, even without formal age-grades in contemporary societies, children over the age of four or five usually spend a great deal of time in the company of friends of the same age. Given the increasing number of dual-earner households, peer relationships formed in schools are likely to become more important than in previous decades (Corsaro 2005; Harris 1998).

We discuss socialization within education systems in [chapter 16](#), 'Education'.

Much of the early research on media influence on children assumed that children are passive and undiscriminating in reaction to what they see and hear. But socialization takes place through processes of *inter-action* within which individuals (including very young children) are actively engaged (Stanley and Wise 2002). Today it is widely accepted that the child's response still involves interpreting or 'reading' the content of media outputs. Researchers have arrived at a more balanced understanding of the influence of the mass media in socialization processes and now consider television, for example, as one important agency of socialization alongside several others.

[Chapter 19](#), 'The Media', contains an extended discussion of theories of media influence.

It is not unusual for children to oppose, reject or reinterpret the information, norms and values they are taught or see in mass media and for peer groups to form subcultures, or counter-cultures, in opposition to the mainstream. Agencies of socialization provide sites or structures for socialization processes, but they do not determine the outcome (see the section covering the 'new' sociology of childhood later in this chapter). Similarly, socialization should not be seen as entirely negative – as an imposition or restraint on the individual. Socialization is also enabling, as people learn and develop the cultural skills that are essential for leading a satisfying life in their society.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

14.1 Playing with gender

In *Gender Play* (1993), Barrie Thorne looked at gendered socialization by observing children interacting in the school playground. As others had before her, she wanted to understand how children come to know what it means to be 'male' or 'female'. Rather than seeing them as passively learning the meaning of gender from their parents and teachers, she looked at the way in which children actively create and re-create the *meaning* of gender in interactions with each other.

Thorne spent two years observing fourth and fifth graders at two schools, in Michigan and California, sitting in the classroom with them and observing their activities outside the classroom. She watched games such as 'chase and kiss' – known by names such as 'kisscatch' in the UK – so as to learn how children construct and experience gender meanings in the classroom and in the playground. She found that peer groups have a great influence on gender socialization, particularly as children talk about their changing bodies – a subject of great fascination.

The social context created by these children determined whether a child's bodily change was experienced with embarrassment or worn with pride. Thorne noted that, if the most popular girls started menstruating or wearing bras, the other girls began to want these changes as well. However, the opposite was also the case: when popular girls didn't wear bras or had not started menstruating, then others saw these as much less desirable.

Thorne's research is a powerful illustration that children are social actors who help to shape their social world. However, acknowledging the active role played by children in the construction of gender does not mean that gender is malleable and gender inequality can therefore be readily eliminated. Rice (2014: 67–9) argues that the two-gender system across society produces

persistent pressures on children to take on a gendered identity and has serious consequences in their lives. This system is firmly embedded within virtually all aspects of society, from gendered children's toys to targeted make-up for girls and separate toilets in shops and public places. Rice says that, 'Beyond brushing off stereotypes, altering this system requires broader and deeper changes at social, psychological, and physical levels, such as changing our language, institutions, relationships, and our sense of our bodies and selves.' This is a useful reminder of the deeply embedded character of existing social structures.

In school playgrounds, girls tend to play with other girls and boys with boys. Does this reinforce or reflect the 'two-gender' system?

Learning gender

To what extent are gender differences and the learning of gender roles the result of gender socialization? Gender learning by infants is almost certainly unconscious. Before a child can accurately label themselves as a boy or girl they receive a range of pre-verbal cues. For instance, men and women tend to handle infants differently, and the cosmetics used by women contain scents different from those a baby might learn to associate with men. Systematic differences in dress, hairstyle, and so on, also provide visual cues for the infant in the learning process.

Zammuner (1986) studied the toy preferences of children aged seven to ten in Italy and the Netherlands. She analysed children's attitudes towards a variety of stereotypically masculine and feminine toys, as well as those thought not to be gender-typed. The children and their parents were asked to assess which toys were suitable for boys and which for girls, and there was close agreement between both adults and children.

On average, the Italian children chose genderdifferentiated toys to play with more often than the Dutch children – a finding that conformed to expectations, since Italian culture tends to hold a more traditional view of gender divisions. As in other studies, girls from both societies chose gender-neutral or boys' toys to play with far more than boys chose girls' toys. Clearly, early gender socialization is very powerful and challenges to it can be upsetting. Once gender is 'assigned', it is expected that individuals will act like 'females' and 'males'. It is in the practices of everyday life that these expectations are fulfilled, reproduced and challenged (Bourdieu 1990; Lorber 1994).

Sigmund Freud and gender identity

One of the most influential and criticized theories of gender identity is that of the founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). Freud (1995 [1933]) argued that learning gender differences in infancy and early childhood is centred on the possession or absence of the penis. 'I have a penis' is equivalent to 'I am a boy', while 'I am a girl' is equivalent to 'I lack a penis'. Freud is careful to say that it is not just the anatomical distinctions that matter here; the possession or absence of the penis is symbolic of masculinity and femininity.

Global society 14.1 Gender roles in children's fiction

In a US study of some 6,000 children's books, McCabe et al. (2011) reported that males constituted 57 per cent of central characters compared to 31 per cent of females. Where the central characters were animals, the disparity was even starker, with 23 per cent of books having male main characters and just 7.5 per cent female. One interesting finding from this study is that the shift towards gender equality in children's fictional characters is not simply linear. Instead, it seems that moves towards equality of representation run parallel to active phases of feminism. Hence, the period between 1930 and the 1960s, which fell between two waves of overt feminist activism, exhibited the largest inequality of gender representation. Gendered stereotypes remain remarkably persistent even into the twenty-first century (Hamilton et al. 2006).

Although traditional stories may have changed somewhat, the underlying messages within children's literature remain remarkably similar (Davies 1991; Parke and Clarke-Stewart 2010: 347–50). Fairy-tales, for example, embody traditional attitudes towards gender and the aims and ambitions girls and boys are expected to have. 'Some day my prince will come', in versions of fairy-tales from several centuries ago, implied that a girl from a poor family might dream of wealth and fortune. Today its meaning has become more closely tied to ideals of romantic love. Studies of television programmes and films designed for children show that most still conform to the findings about children's books. Studies of the most frequently watched cartoons also show that most of the leading figures are males who dominate the active pursuits.

Yet in recent years there have been some exceptions to this repetitively gendered pattern. For instance, in the animated musical film *Moana* (2016), the title character is the strong-minded daughter of a Polynesian island chief who embarks on a dangerous (and successful) quest to recover a goddess's heart and eventually becomes chief herself. *Shrek* (2001) (and its sequels) was an

apparently conventional tale of princes, princesses and ogres which also subverted conventional fairy-tale gender roles. The film's marketing tagline was 'The greatest fairy-tale never told' – 'The Prince isn't charming. The Princess isn't sleeping. The sidekick isn't helping. The ogre is the hero. Fairy-tales will never be the same again.' Shrek (the ugly ogre) is actually the hero of the film, while Fiona (the beautiful princess) is an independent woman with martial arts skills who turns into an ogress at night. The 'happy ending' arrives when Shrek kisses Fiona, she turns permanently into an ogress and they get married, thus reversing the traditional story of the ogre turning into a handsome young prince, reflecting Western ideals of beauty and bodily perfection. Such representations are increasing but remain a minority of total output at present.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Watch one hour of mainstream children's television. List all of the characters (animal and human), noting whether they are male or female, active or passive, central or peripheral. Write a 500-word summary of your findings, comparing them to the studies outlined above.

At around the age of four or five, a boy feels threatened by the discipline and autonomy his father demands of him, fantasizing that the father wishes to remove his penis. Mainly on an unconscious level, the boy recognizes the father as a rival for the affections of his mother. In repressing erotic feelings towards the mother and accepting the father as a superior being, the boy identifies with the father and becomes aware of his male identity. Girls, on the other hand, are said to suffer from 'penis envy' because they do not possess the visible organ that distinguishes boys. The mother becomes devalued in the girl's eyes, because she is also seen to lack a penis. When the girl identifies with the mother, she takes over the submissive attitude involved in the recognition of being 'second best'.

Once this phase is over, the child has learned to repress his or her erotic feelings. The period from about the age of five to puberty, according to Freud, is one of latency – sexual activities tend to be suspended until the biological changes involved in puberty reactivate erotic desires in a direct way. The latency period, covering the early and middle years of school, is the time at which same-gender peer groups are most important in the child's life.

Major criticisms have been made of Freud's ideas, particularly by feminists (Mitchell 1975; Coward 1984). First, Freud seems to identify gender identity too closely with genital awareness, but other more subtle factors are now thought to be involved. Second, the theory seems to depend on the notion that the penis is superior to the vagina, which is represented as just a lack of the male organ. But why should the female genitals not be considered superior to those of the male? Third, Freud treats the father as the primary disciplining agent, whereas in many cultures the mother plays the more significant part in the imposition of discipline. Fourth, Freud argues that gender learning is concentrated at the age of four or five years of age, but later authors have emphasized the importance of much earlier learning, beginning in infancy.

Carol Gilligan – morality, care and justice

Carol Gilligan (1982) pushed Chodorow's analysis further, looking into the area of moral norms and judgements (see 'Classic studies' 14.2). Her work concentrates on the images that adult women and men have of themselves and their achievements. Women do define themselves in terms of personal relationships and judge their achievements by reference to their ability to care for others. But the qualities developed in these tasks are frequently devalued by men, who see their own emphasis on individual achievement as the only form of 'success'. Concern with relationships on the part of women appears to them as a weakness rather than as the strength that in fact it is.

Gilligan carried out intensive interviews with about 200 American women and men of varying ages and social backgrounds. She asked all the interviewees a range of questions concerning their moral outlook and conceptions of self. Consistent differences emerged between the

views of the women and the men. For instance, the interviewees were asked: 'What does it mean to say something is morally right or wrong?' The men tended to respond to this question by mentioning abstract ideals of duty, justice and individual freedom, while the women persistently raised the theme of helping others (Gilligan 1982).

The women were more tentative in their moral judgements than the men, seeing possible contradictions between following a strict moral code and avoiding harming others. Gilligan suggests that this outlook reflects the traditional situation of women, anchored in an ethic of caring more than it does the 'outward-looking' attitudes of men, based on an ethic of justice. Women have in the past deferred to the judgements of men, while being aware that they have qualities that most men lack. Their views of themselves are based on successfully fulfilling the needs of others rather than on pride in individual achievement.

The theories mentioned in this section try to explain various aspects of gender differences and gender identity, linking these to childhood socialization and formative relationships. However, today there is a much deeper understanding of the fluidity of gender and gender identities than was the case when these theorists developed their ideas. For example, there is a growing acknowledgement of transgender and transsexual identities and the development of queer theory, which problematized the taken-for-granted heteronormativity of modern societies. Nonetheless, the earlier theories help to explain how traditional gender identities and gender norms are created and sustained through the life course.

[Classic studies 14.2](#) Nancy Chodorow: attachment, separation and gender identities

The research problem

It is commonplace to report that women are more likely to express how they are feeling while men find it difficult to express their emotions and tend to 'bottle things up' or 'keep a stiff upper lip'. But why should this be so? Are women really just naturally better than men at forming close emotional relationships? These common-sense assumptions formed the basis for Nancy Chodorow's (1978) work on gender identity. Like many others, Chodorow made use of Freud's approach in studying gender development but modified it in major respects to account for important gender differences.

Chodorow's explanation

Chodorow (1978, 1988) argues that learning to feel male or female derives from the infant's attachment to parents from an early age. She places much more emphasis than Freud on the importance of the mother. Children tend to become emotionally involved with the mother, since she is easily the most dominant influence in their early lives. This attachment has at some point to be broken in order for the child to achieve a separate sense of self – the child is required to become less closely dependent.

Chodorow argues that the breaking process occurs in a different way for boys and girls. Girls remain closer to the mother – able, for example, to go on hugging and kissing her and imitating what she does. Because there is no sharp break from the mother, the girl, and later the adult woman, develops a sense of self that is more continuous with other people. Her identity is more likely to be merged with or dependent on another's: first her mother, later a man. In Chodorow's view, this tends to produce characteristics of sensitivity and emotional compassion in women.

Boys gain a sense of self via a more radical rejection of their original closeness to the mother, forging their understanding of masculinity from what is not feminine. They learn not to be 'sissies' or 'mummy's boys'. As a result, boys are relatively unskilled in relating closely to others; they develop more analytical ways of looking at the world. They take a more active view of their lives, emphasizing achievement, but they have repressed their ability to understand their own feelings and those of others.

To some extent, Chodorow reverses Freud's emphasis. Masculinity, rather than femininity, is defined by a loss – the forfeiting of continued close attachment to the mother. Male identity is formed through separation; thus, men later in life unconsciously feel that their identity is endangered if they become involved in close emotional relationships with others. Women, on the other hand, feel that the absence of a close relation to another person threatens their self-esteem. These patterns are passed on from generation to generation because of the primary role women play in the early socialization of children. Women express and define themselves mainly in terms of relationships. Men have repressed these needs and adopt a more manipulative stance towards the world.

Critical points

Chodorow's work has met with various criticisms. Janet Sayers (1986), for example, suggested that Chodorow does not explain the struggle of women to become autonomous, independent beings. Women (and men), she points out, are more contradictory in their psychological make-up than the theory suggests. Femininity may conceal feelings of aggressiveness or assertiveness which are revealed only obliquely or in certain contexts (Brennan 1988). Chodorow has also been criticized for her narrow conception of the family, based on a white, middle-class model. What happens, for example, in one-parent households or, as in many Chicano communities, in families where children are cared for by more than one adult (Segura and Pierce 1993)? Rich (1980) also argued that Chodorow's theory was 'heteronormative', suggesting that lesbian relationships were inferior to heterosexual ones as lesbians had not adequately resolved their desire for their mothers.

Contemporary significance

These legitimate criticisms do not undermine Chodorow's central ideas, which remain important in the study of gender socialization. They teach us a good deal about the nature of femininity and masculinity, and they help us to understand the origins of what has been called '[male inexpressiveness](#)' – the difficulty men have in revealing their feelings to others (Bourdieu 2001).

The life course

The transitions or stages through which individuals pass during their lives seem to be biologically fixed and universal. This common-sense view of the human lifespan is widely accepted, but it suggests that a universal and uniform set of stages exists through which we all must pass. For example, everyone who lives to old age has been an infant, a child, a youth, an adult and an old person, and, eventually, everyone dies. A similar concept is the life cycle, which also explores individual, biological stages, but this concept also carries a sense of life itself being a continuous circle or 'cycle' of birth, life and death that repeats in every generation. In disciplines such as psychology, medicine and demography, the focus has conventionally been on the human lifespan and life cycle (Green 2015: 98).

However, historically and sociologically, these concepts are overly simplistic. The apparently natural biological stages are just one aspect of the human life course, which is a social and psychological as well as a biological phenomenon (Vincent 2003; Hunt 2017; Green 2017). The concept of the life course reflects the sociological and historical evidence that there is considerable variation in the stages of life both in different societies and over time in the same society. This means that the individual life course is not universally experienced but is subject to processes of social construction (Chatterjee et al. 2001). Stages of the life course are influenced by cultural norms and the material circumstances of people's lives in given types of society. For example, in modern Western societies, death is usually thought of in relation to elderly people, because most people live into old age. In many societies of the past, however, more people died younger than survived to old age, and death carried a different meaning and set of expectations.

Class, gender, disability and ethnicity also influence the way that the life course is experienced, and the intertwining of these major social divisions – known as intersectionality – produces complex patterns of experience. In nineteenth-century Britain, children of the upper classes routinely attended boarding schools and continued their education over an extended period. However, for children from working-class

families, the expectation was of work, not education, and it was not unusual for thirteen-year-old boys to work in coal-mining and other industries, while many girls of the same age went into domestic service. Clearly, the notion of a set of *universal* and age-related stages making up the human life course is not borne out by the historical evidence.

The concept of intersectionality is discussed in detail in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', chapter 9, 'Stratification and Social Class', and also chapters 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', and 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

The individual life course is not only structured by the major social divisions; it is also historically situated. One way of thinking about this aspect is to consider the concepts of birth cohorts and generations. Birth cohorts (cohorts for short) are simply groups of people who are born 'within a few years of each other who share some common experiences, such as going to school or experiencing a war together' (Green 2015: 101). Sociologists argue that cohorts have some common cultural and political reference points, such as specific governments and musical trends, that give shape to the life course. However, a cohort does not usually form a distinct social group.

The Hungarian-born sociologist Karl Mannheim (1893–1947) made a strong claim regarding the influence of particular generations on life course experience. Generations (sometimes called social generations) are groups of people born in the same series of years who, unlike cohorts, form a particular social group that shares a worldview or common frame of reference (Alwin et al. 2006: 49). Mannheim (1972 [1928]: 105) said that 'Individuals who belong to the same generation … are endowed … with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process.' His claim is that generational location can be as influential as social class position in shaping people's attitudes and beliefs.

Generations tend to experience the world, and their place in it, rather differently. Hence we can speak of a 'Millennial generation' (born between 1981 and 1996), Generation Z (those born after 1996) and even a 'generation gap', to describe the historical location of different generations and their divergent attitudes and values. For instance, Millennials have also been described as the 'IPOD generation' – Insecure, Pressured, Overtaxed and Debt-ridden – facing job insecurity while being entirely at ease with high technology and consumer culture and leaning towards individualistic, neo-liberal politics (Green 2015: 102). Generation Z is the first to undergo 'digital socialization', with digital technology and devices being a routine and quite normal aspect of their formative school years. The assumption behind all of these categorizations is that the generational group in question is, in some significant way(s), different from that which came before.

The hippy youth culture of the 1960s and 1970s was an important influence on identities in the USA and other developed societies. Its legacy continued to influence later generations.

Baby boomers are those born in the aftermath of the Second World War (roughly between 1946 and 1964), when many countries experienced large increases in birth rates, arguably a consequence of post-war

economic growth, prosperity and peace (Gillon 2004). Baby boomers had many new experiences: television in the home, a new youth culture, rising income levels, and more liberal attitudes to sex and morality. The experiences of baby boomers were significantly different from those of their parents, and, with the creation of 'youth' as a stage of life, so too was their experience of the life course. Indeed, Mannheim's argument suggests that this generation actually transformed society itself. This dual aspect of giving shape to the life course and producing social change is why Mannheim sees generations as akin to social classes in their potential impact on societies.

Green (2017) argues that the early childhood experiences of people today may be increasingly diverse as the trend towards late childbearing continues, and this may cause problems for those studying generations. Some first-time parents may be in their twenties, while others are in their forties or fifties, and we therefore cannot assume that the parents of children are part of the same generation, passing on the same experiences and values. Although it is true that the study of generations has tended to be rather generalized and lacking precision, it has also produced some very useful socio-historical insights.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Which generation is yours? What social, political and economic events may have influenced your attitudes and political affiliation? Is 'generation' as powerful as class, gender or ethnicity in shaping your life experience?

The next section looks at some key life course stages, particularly as they have changed over time in the developed countries. This is not exhaustive – we do not spend much time on 'mid-life' (those aged approximately forty to sixty-five), for instance – and the topic should be pursued through the further reading section at the end of the chapter. Childhood, youth and old age have been the main stages covered in sociological research, and the section reflects this. Yet it is important to remember that the bulk of sociology in all of its specialist fields generally takes adult life very much for granted as its main focus without directly engaging with the life course perspective. This basic

assumption is also a 'common-sense' one that childhood and youth are preparatory stages leading to 'normal' adult life, while old age occurs after our period of 'useful' working life. The emergence of a life course perspective has highlighted such assumptions, opening them up for critical scrutiny.

Childhood

Until around the mid-1980s sociologists discussed children and childhood in the context of primary socialization within the family. This often gave the impression that childhood is a merely transitional stage in the process of becoming a sociologically significant adult. Yet the idea of childhood as 'mere transition' ignores the *social structural* position of children within societies. That is, children can be conceptualized as a distinct social group in the same way as social classes or ethnic groups. Children tend to experience life through their own culture, with its unique symbols and rituals, and they have a similar status to some other minority groups, which has often led to them being exploited as a cheap source of labour (James et al. 1998).

Since the late 1980s, a new paradigm – often called the new sociology of childhood – has demonstrated that what we call 'childhood' is in large measure a social construction that is not universal (Corsaro 2005). The experience of childhood and its meaning for society are diverse in different historical periods and in different geographical regions in the same time period. The new paradigm also signalled a shift away from functionalist and other theories which saw children as merely 'becoming' members of society. Instead, children are considered as active participants or 'beings' in their own right, who interpret and construct their own lives, cultures and relationships (Prout and James 1990; Prout 2005). The theoretical move from studying processes of 'becoming' to the actions of 'beings' has been highly significant (Jenks 2005; Thomas 2009).

For instance, placing the active child at the centre of sociological analysis leads to new questions and alternative research strategies. Ethnographies, diaries and other qualitative methods are particularly effective research tools in this field as they allow children's voices to be

heard and their reasoning and interpretations to be brought into the open. The study of children's post-divorce experience by Smart et al. (2001) exemplifies this approach, enabling divorce to be viewed from the standpoint of the children involved. Sociologists working with the new paradigm might ask what family or divorce *means* to the children involved or how they are related to children's lives (O'Brien et al. 1996; Seung Lam and Pollard 2006). Looking at family life or schooling from the standpoint of the child opens up new avenues for sociologists, producing a more comprehensive understanding of childhood.

However, the new paradigm has itself been challenged. Some argue that the strong focus on children as 'active beings' falls into an old trap of assuming that there are 'sovereign individuals' who are autonomous and free from their inevitable relations with others. This conception is rooted in the similar notion of a stable *adulthood*. But the latter has recently come under close scrutiny as 'jobs for life' have diminished, along with permanent, lifelong relationships, in the more fluid or 'liquid modernity' characterizing the contemporary world (Bauman 2000). As a result, Nick Lee (2001) argues that *both* childhood *and* adulthood should be seen as 'in process' or in a continuous state of becoming. Even so, Prout (2005: 66) maintains that 'Both adults and children can be seen in these terms as becomings without compromising the need to respect their status as beings or persons.'

That the new sociology of childhood has produced some fascinating insights is not in doubt, but it does seem likely that future research will try to balance 'being' and 'becoming' in the study of childhood.

Constructing childhoods

It hardly seems necessary to discuss the concept of [childhood](). Surely children are just distinct from babies or toddlers and childhood intervenes between infancy and teenage years? Yet the concept of 'childhood', like so many other aspects of life today, has come into being only over the past two to three hundred years. In many other societies, young people move directly from a lengthy infancy into working roles within the community. The French historian Philippe Ariès (1965) argued that 'childhood', as a separate phase of development, did not exist in medieval Europe. In the paintings of the period, children are

portrayed as small adults with mature faces and the same style of dress as their elders. Children took part in the same work and play activities as adults, rather than in the childhood games we now take for granted.

In the early twentieth century, children were set to work at what now seems a very early age, and there are countries in the world today in which children are engaged in full-time work, often in physically demanding circumstances such as coal-mines and agriculture. The idea that children have distinctive rights and that the use of child labour is 'obviously' morally repugnant is really a quite recent development. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) came into force in 1990, setting out the basic rights of all children across the world; by 2009 it had been ratified by 194 countries (excluding the USA and Somalia) (UNICEF 2014). The UNCRC defines a child as anyone under the age of eighteen, except where nation-states already have an earlier definition.

Universalizing the rights of children and definitions of childhood in very different social and economic contexts is bold and raises some important issues. Is the UN definition culturally sensitive to different societies or does it impose Western ideas on the rest of the world? Can the governments of the developing world really put in place the same safeguards for protecting children's rights that already largely exist in the developed societies? And, if they do, will it impede economic development and effectively restrict the income-generating capacity of the poorest families? For example, in many developing countries, 'street children' earn money for poor families by selling goods; if states penalize such practices as 'deviant', how will poor families survive? These are very difficult questions which are currently being worked out in policy and practice across the world.

The issue of child labour is discussed in [chapter 6](#), 'Global Inequality'.

It seems that, as a result of changes currently under way in modern societies, the separate character of childhood is diminishing once more, bringing adult–child relations towards crisis point. The uncertainties associated with globalization processes and the kind of rapid social changes we explored in [chapter 4](#) are leading to new social constructions of childhood. Prout (2005: 7) suggests that 'These new representations construct children as more active, knowledgeable and socially participative than older discourses allowed. They are more difficult to manage, less biddable and hence are more troublesome and troubling.' It seems that relationships between adults and children are in a period of flux and major disturbance.

Other observers have suggested that children now grow up so fast that the previously solid boundary between adults and children is rapidly diminishing, leading to the 'disappearance' of childhood in developed societies (Postman 1995; Buckingham 2000). They point out that even small children may watch the same television programmes as adults, thereby becoming more familiar with the adult world than preceding generations. Children are becoming consumers at an earlier age, availing themselves of adult products such as TV programmes, mobile phones and advertising.

In addition, there is a widespread concern that children face pressures to develop sexualized lifestyles before they are ready to do so. A UK government-commissioned report, *Letting Children Be Children* (Bailey 2011), surveyed a sample of parents, children, businesses and other organizations for their views on the commercialization and sexualization of childhood. Many parents thought that we live in a commercial, sexualized culture that is not appropriate for their children. This culture includes sexualized imagery in magazines, pop videos and TV programmes, as well as online.

However, parents in the survey said their biggest concern was 'sexualized and genderstereotyped clothing, services and products' and a 'prurient press' (Bailey 2011: 9). They also perceived themselves as quite powerless to change the culture or to make an impact on businesses and thought that there was insufficient regulation in the new media such as the internet and smartphones. All of this suggests that the protected period of childhood, which characterized the

developed countries for most of the twentieth century, is being seriously eroded today.

Teenage and youth culture

The idea of the 'teenager', so familiar to us today, did not exist until relatively recently. The biological changes involved in puberty (the point at which a person becomes capable of adult sexual activity and reproduction) are universal, though in many cultures these do not produce the degree of turmoil and uncertainty found in modern societies. In cultures that foster age-grades, for example, with distinct ceremonies that signal a person's transition to adulthood, the process of psychosexual development generally seems easier to negotiate. In Western societies, children reach a point at which they are expected to act as children no longer, but in other cultures, where children are already working alongside adults, the transition beyond childhood may be much less stark and definitive.

In contemporary developed societies, teenagers are betwixt and between: they often try to follow adult ways, but they are treated in law as children. They may wish to go to work, but they are constrained to stay in school. Thus teenagers live between childhood and adulthood, growing up in a society subject to continuous change, which shifts the apparently fixed boundaries between life stages.

Linked to the idea of the teenager is that of youth culture, a general way of life associated with young people. In many other societies, past and present, the concept of youth culture in this sense does not exist. Instead, children move towards adulthood much earlier without the intermediate stage of 'youth'. Sociologists first reported on youth culture in the 1950s and 1960s, when older teenagers moving into employment began to benefit from post-war affluence, using their earnings to buy fashionable clothes, pop records and other products in emerging consumer markets (Savage 2007). A 'culture of youth' began to coalesce that looked different from the mainstream, which constructed new meaningful worlds out of which sprang the spectacular youth subcultures of teddy boys, mods, rockers and skinheads and, later, hippies, punks, rastas, goths, and many more.

With hindsight, sociologists probably expended too much effort investigating the small, male-dominated, but highly visible subcultures and not enough effort in trying to understand the majority of young people and the ways in which they make sense of their own lives. For instance, McRobbie and Garber (1975) identified a widespread and more concealed 'culture of the bedroom' among girls, which enabled groups of friends to participate in the culture of youth, but which had been largely ignored in the rush to analyse 'deviant' (male) subcultures in the public sphere.

Despite many 'classic' studies of spectacular youth cultures, a majority of young people are not active participants but continue to engage in more mundane pursuits.

Miles (2000) suggests that the concepts of youth culture and subcultures have misled us into seeing all young people as essentially similar, involved in counter-cultural and deviant activity or experiencing unique disadvantages. Yet the mainstream of young people did not – and still do not – fit this description. Instead, Miles proposes the concept of *youth lifestyles*, which suggests a diversity of experience within mainstream youth and focuses on the question 'How … do young people interact with and negotiate the social worlds in

which they construct their everyday lives?' (ibid.: 2). Such a perspective reminds us of both the common, shared experiences of youth in a rapidly changing world and the different responses young people adopt towards it.

Deviant youth subcultures are discussed in , 'Crime and Deviance'.

Young adulthood

Sociology, like other social scientific disciplines, is dominated by studies of the way that adult humans live. As a result the concept of 'adulthood' has, until recently, remained relatively unquestioned, meaning that 'there is yet no convincing sociology of adulthood equivalent to the sociologies of childhood, of youth and of old age' (Pilcher et al. 2003). For example, the study of doctor–patient relationships simply assumed mature adult doctors and adult patients, with little or no regard for the different experiences of children or young adults.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, sociologists began to theorize a new phase within the life course in developed societies which we can call young adulthood (Goldscheider and Waite 1991). The systematic study of this stage is not yet as fully developed as that of childhood or later life. It also implies that a 'middle' or perhaps a 'mature' adulthood exists, before people move into their 'old age' (Green 2017). Young adulthood is said to characterize people from around eighteen to the mid-thirties, who live quite independent lives but have not yet married or had children and, as a consequence, are still experimenting with relationships and lifestyles.

However, this stage is not experienced in the same way by men and women, all social classes or different ethnic groups. It is particularly among the more affluent groups that people in their early to mid-

twenties are taking the time to travel and explore sexual, political and religious affiliations (Heath and Cleaver 2003). Indeed, the importance of this postponement of the responsibilities of full adulthood is likely to increase, given the extended period of education many people in the developed world now undergo.

In recent years, sociologists have studied the problems faced by young adults in a time of austerity politics, rising housing costs, high levels of personal indebtedness and job insecurity. Many young adults today remain dependent on the material and financial support of parents and other family members into their late twenties and beyond. Some have characterized this as the 'boomerang generation' (Newman 2012), because many young adults are trying to move on and live independent lives but find themselves unable to do so without the continuing support of family members. Heath and Calvert (2013) found that intergenerational support ranges widely, from small cash loans and gifts to cover bills and expenses all the way up to large mortgage deposits and the provision of accommodation within the family home. This extended period of dependency is often experienced by young adults as compromising their autonomy and independence.

This particular stage of life is likely to become much less gendered, as more young women now go on to university, forge careers and become independent instead of settling into traditional family life at an early age. We can expect scholars studying the life course to carry out more research on young adulthood over the next decade.

Mature adulthood

Most young adults in the developed world today can look forward to a life stretching into an old age of seventy or eighty years and beyond. But, in pre-industrial times, few could anticipate such a future with much confidence; indeed, nor do young adults in the poorer parts of the developing world today. Death through sickness or injury was much more frequent among all age groups than it is now, and women in particular were at risk because of high rates of mortality in childbirth. On the other hand, some of the strains that mature adults – roughly people in their late thirties to around sixty-five years old – experience

today were less pronounced in previous times. People usually maintained a closer connection with their parents and other kin than the more mobile populations of the twenty-first century, and the routines of work they followed were much the same as those of previous generations.

Today there are major uncertainties in work, personal relationships and marriage, family life and many other contexts. Individuals increasingly have to 'make' their own lives, much more so than in the past. Among many social groups, the creation of sexual and marital ties now depends mainly on individual initiative and selection rather than being fixed by parents, though this is not the case in all cultures. While individual choice can be experienced as the freedom to decide, the responsibility to *have to* choose also imposes its own pressures. Some have theorized the emergence of a 'new middle age' in adulthood, in which those approaching old age engage in active consumerism and are concerned with youthfulness and personal reinvention as they grow older (Featherstone and Hepworth 1989).

Keeping a forward-looking outlook in mature adulthood has taken on a particular importance. Most people no longer expect to be doing the same thing throughout life. Adults who have worked in one career may find the level they have reached in mature adulthood unsatisfying and that further opportunities are blocked. Women who have spent early adulthood raising a family may feel they have little social value once children have left home. The phenomenon of the 'mid-life crisis' is very real for many mature adults today. A person may feel they have thrown away the opportunities that life had to offer or that they will never attain goals cherished since childhood. Yet growing older need not lead to resignation or bleak despair. For some, a release from childhood dreams can actually be liberating.

Among early cultures, elders usually had a major – often final – say over matters of importance to the community. Within families, the authority of both men and women tended to increase with age. But, under conditions of capitalist modernity, 'retirement' from work may bring the opposite, as older people lose authority both within the family and in the wider community. Having retired from the labour force, they may be materially poorer and be perceived to have little to offer young

people by way of advice. Some sociologists have suggested that older people can become 'strangers in time' as a result of rapid technological, social and economic change (Mead 1978).

For example, those born between 1981 and 1996 (aged twenty-four to thirty-nine by 2020) have come to be known as the Millennial generation, whose formative experiences included the conflicts in Kuwait, Iraq and Afghanistan and the 9/11 terror attacks in the USA, as well as the rapid spread of internet use. Millennials were also the most ethnically diverse generation. As young adults they went through the 2008 financial crash and the rise of precarious forms of work and faced the impact of these developments on their career opportunities, life chances and prospects of being able to buy a home (Dimock 2019). The hashtag and phrase #OK Boomer was popularized in 2019 as a retort to the perceived failure of older, financially secure and comfortable baby boomers to understand or appreciate the very different and more difficult economic context that faced Millennials.

In the next section, we look at the sociological issues surrounding ageing. The study of later life and ageing – social gerontology – is well established, with a large body of research and evidence, and this is reflected in the rest of this chapter.

Ageing

The oldest woman taking part in the 2019 London Marathon was Eileen Noble, aged eighty-four, from South-East London. Eileen began running seriously only in her fifties, and 2019 was her nineteenth London Marathon (Hobson 2019). Ken Jones, from Strabane in Northern Ireland, has taken part in all thirty-nine London Marathons, one of only eleven people to have done so. In 2019 he ran it again at the age of eighty-five, though he said the fortieth in 2020 would be his last (Goodbody 2019). The oldest ever runner in the London Marathon is Fauja Singh, from Ilford, East London. He ran marathons all over the world, raising money for charities (Askwith 2003). In 2011, he realized a long-held ambition, finishing the Toronto Waterfront Marathon in 8 hours 25 minutes at age 100.

These runners' stories illustrate the fact that, especially in the wealthier countries, not only are people, on average, living longer, they are also staying heathier into very old age. When she became monarch in 1952, Queen Elizabeth II sent out 273 birthday telegrams to congratulate British centenarians on their 100th birthdays, but by the end of the twentieth century she was sending more than 3,000 birthday cards per year (Cayton 2000). Recent forecasts by the government's Office for National Statistics suggest that, by 2066, there will be more than 500,000 centenarians in the UK alone. Babies born in 2011 were eight times more likely to live to be 100 than those born in 1931, and girls born in 2011 have a 1 in 3 chance of living to 100 years, while for boys this is 1 in 4 (*The Guardian* 2011). Growing old can be a fulfilling and rewarding experience, but it can also be a time of physical distress and social isolation. For most people, the reality of ageing lies somewhere between these extremes.

Twenty-six miles is a long way to run. Yet it is not unusual to see people taking up marathon running in later life.
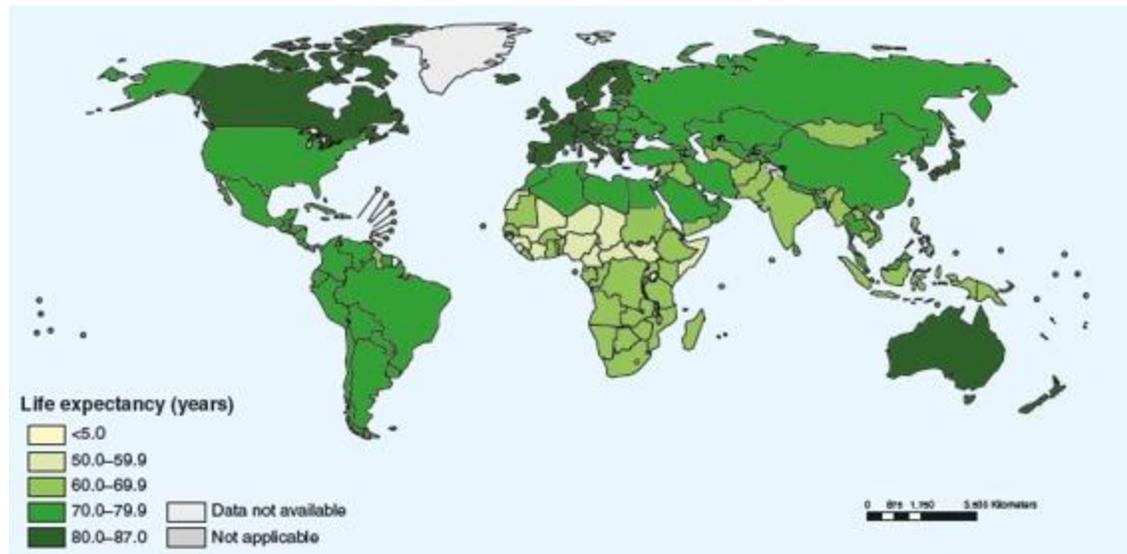
Figure 14.1 Global life expectancy at birth, both sexes, 2016

Note: WHO member states with a population of less than 90,000 in 2015 were not included in the analysis.

Source: WHO (2018c).

The 'greying' of human societies

Human societies all over the world are ageing, but they are not doing so evenly. One example is the startling national differences in average life expectancy (see figure 14.1). The global average life expectancy in 2016 was 72 years (74.2 for females and 69.8 for males), an increase of 5.5 per cent since the year 2000 (WHO 2018c). But, at the extremes, in 2012 life expectancy at birth in Afghanistan was 49.72 years (48.45 for men, 51.05 for women), while in Monaco it was 89.68 years (85.74 for men and 93.77 for women) (CIA 2012). Such grossly unequal life chances illustrate the very different ageing experiences of people across the world.

Unequal life chances also point to the various meanings attached to the idea of the life course. In the developed world, being forty years of age means people are entering 'mid-life' or 'mature adulthood', but, in some developing countries, reaching the age of forty is effectively 'later life'. Such wide disparities in average life expectancy also shape experiences of death, dying and bereavement. Although most of this section will focus on debates and evidence from the relatively wealthy developed countries, we have to bear in mind that the situation in the developing world is very different, and the 'ageing experience' differs accordingly.

The situation in developing countries is discussed extensively in chapter 6, 'Global Inequality'.

The proportion of the global population over sixty years of age was just 8 per cent in 1950 and had risen to 11 per cent by 2009. However, this is forecast to double by 2050, to 22 per cent. The fastest growth of the group aged sixty-five and older will take place in the industrialized countries, where families have fewer children and people, on average, live longer. But, after the middle of this century, the developing nations will follow suit, as they experience their own 'elder explosion' (UNFPA 2011: 33–4).
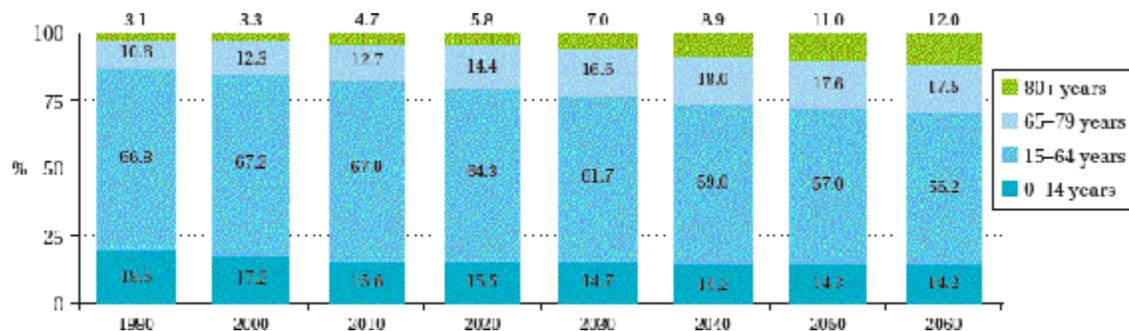
Figure 14.2 Population structure by major age groups, EU-27, 1990–2060 (projected)

Source: Eurostat (2011).

As figure 14.2 illustrates in relation to the European Union, such a long-term shift in the age structure of the developed societies is well under way. By the year 2060, almost one-third of Europe's population will be over the age of sixtyfive and more than one-fifth will be over the age of eighty, while the current working-age population (those aged fifteen to sixty-four) will decline by about 10 per cent, to 56 per cent of Europe's total population. The definition of 'working age' is also shifting as people continue working well beyond sixty-four.

The ageing of the global population has enormous implications for social policy. More than 150 nations currently provide public assistance for people who are elderly or disabled, or, following their death, for their survivors. Older people are likely to require costly healthcare services, and the rapid growth in numbers strains the medical systems of many nations. Sociologists and gerontologists refer to the changing age structure as the greying of the population (Peterson 1999). 'Greying' is the result of two long-term trends in industrial societies: the tendency of families to have fewer children (discussed in chapter 15, 'Families and Intimate Relationships') and the fact that people are living longer. Amid the welter of commentary suggesting that an ageing population will bring difficult problems for governments and policy-makers, it is important to bear in mind the remarkable human success story that such figures demonstrate.

The populations of most of the world's societies are ageing as the result of a decline in both birth and death rates, although the populations of developing countries continue to have shorter lifespans because of economic disadvantage, poverty, malnutrition and disease (see chapter 6, 'Global Inequality'). The world's average life expectancy at birth grew from around 48 years in 1950, to 65.3 years in 1990 and 72 years in 2016 (Reuters 2015; WHO 2018c). Over the period 1950 to 2010, average life expectancy rose by twenty-six years in the developing countries compared with just eleven years in the developed world (UNFPA 2011). The narrowing gap between wealthier and poorer nations shows that the gross global inequality of life expectancy is not inevitable. A notable exception is seen in the countries of sub-Saharan Africa, where life expectancy has actually reduced since the mid-1980s, mainly because of the enormous and continuing impact of HIV/AIDS.

Ageing processes

The ageing process is not a singular one but can be sociologically defined as the combination of biological, psychological and social processes that affect people as they grow older (Abeles and Riley 1987; Atchley 2000). These processes suggest a metaphor of three different, inter related, developmental 'clocks'. The first, a biological one, refers to the physical body; the second, a psychological one, refers to the mind and mental capabilities; and the third, a social one, refers to cultural norms, values and role expectations having to do with age. There is enormous variation in all three. Our ideas about the meaning of age are rapidly changing, both because research is dispelling many myths about ageing and because advances in nutrition and healthcare alongside the shift from manufacturing towards service jobs have enabled many people to live longer, healthier lives than ever before.

In exploring ageing processes, we will draw on some studies from social gerontology, a discipline concerned with the study of the social aspects of ageing, which has provided some key insights into the varied meanings of being 'old' (Riley et al. 1988).

Biological ageing

Biological ageing is probably the most wellknown and visible part of the ageing process. The exact chronological point at which the stages of biological ageing occur varies greatly depending on genetics and lifestyle. In general, for men and women alike, biological ageing typically means some or all of the following:

- declining vision, as the eye lens loses its elasticity

- hearing loss, first of higher-pitched tones

- wrinkles, as the skin's underlying structure becomes more brittle (skin lotions and surgical face-lifts only delay this)

- a decline of muscle mass and accompanying accumulation of fat, especially around the middle

- a fall in cardiovascular efficiency, as less oxygen can be inhaled and utilized during exercise.

These normal effects cannot be avoided, but they can be partly compensated for and offset by good health, proper diet and nutrition, and a reasonable amount of exercise (John 1988). For many, the physical changes of ageing do not significantly prevent them from leading active, independent lives well into their eighties. Some scientists have even argued that, with a healthy lifestyle and advances in medicine, more people will live relatively illness-free lives until they reach their biological maximum, experiencing only a brief period of sickness before death (Fries 1980).

Scientific debate on the upper limit of the human lifespan is divided into 'optimists', who believe there is no genetically programmed upper limit; 'realists', who argue that continual increase in the human lifespan is implausible and around 115 years is the limit; and 'futurists', who see no limitation on human lifespan and believe that future biotechnological developments will lead to healthier later life and a kind of 'eternal youth' (Rafi and Alavi 2017). The world's oldest ever person was French woman, Jeanne Calment, who died in 1997, aged 122. Others have claimed to be even older, but their ages cannot be reliably verified (BBC News 2013).

Even though the majority of older people in the developed societies suffer no significant physical impairment and remain physically active, damaging stereotypes about the 'weak and frail elderly' persist (Victor 2005). These stereotypes have more to do with social meanings of ageing in Western cultures, which are increasingly preoccupied with youthfulness and fears of growing old and dying.

Psychological ageing

Even though memory, learning, intelligence, skills and motivation to learn are widely assumed to decline with age, research into the psychology of ageing suggests a much more complicated process (Birren and Schaie 2001). The psychological effects of ageing are less well established than the physical effects, although research into the psychology of ageing continues to expand (Diehl and Dark-Freudeman 2006).

Memory and learning ability, for example, do not decline significantly until very late in life for most people, although the speed with which one recalls or analyses information may slow down, giving the false impression of mental impairment. For most older people whose lives are stimulating and rich, such mental abilities as motivation to learn, clarity of thought and problem-solving capacity do not appear to decline significantly until very late in life (Atchley 2000).

Recent research has focused on the extent to which memory loss relates to other variables, such as health, personality and social structures. Scientists and psychologists argue that intellectual decline is not uncommon but also not inevitable. Even Alzheimer's disease, the progressive deterioration of brain cells which is the primary cause of dementia in later life, is relatively uncommon in those under the age of sixty-five. However, UK statistics show that one in six people over the age of eighty, and twice as many women as men, have dementia; many of these have Alzheimer's (Alzheimer's Society 2020).

Social ageing

The norms, values and roles that are culturally associated with a particular chronological age are referred to as social ageing. Ideas about social age differ from one society to another and tend to change over time as well. Societies such as Japan and China have traditionally revered older people, regarding them as a source of historical memories and wisdom. But, in the UK and the USA, older people are more likely to be seen as non-productive, dependent and out of step with the times, both because they are less likely to have the high-tech skills valued by young people and because of the cultural obsession with youthfulness.

Role expectations are extremely important sources of personal identity. Some of the roles associated with ageing are generally positive: lord and lady, senior adviser, doting grandparent, religious elder, wise spiritual teacher. But others may be damaging, leading to lowered self-esteem and isolation. Highly stigmatizing stereotypical roles for older people exist: 'grumpy old', 'silly old', 'boring old' and 'dirty old' man or woman, for example (Kirkwood 2001). In fact older people do not simply play out socially assigned social roles in a passive manner; they

actively shape and redefine them (Riley et al. 1988). A striking example of this is the emergence of older people's campaign groups and movements such as the Gray Panthers in the USA, which was created to fight for older people's rights.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Older people today are often seen as lucky, having good pensions, taking earlier retirement and owning their own homes. Conduct an online search for newspaper articles on older people over the last two years. Are there any patterns in the coverage? Is there evidence of stereotyping and, if so, how would you characterize this?

Aspects of ageing

Older people are rich, poor, and everything in between; they belong to all ethnic groups; they live alone and in families of various sorts; they vary in their political values and preferences; and they are gay and lesbian as well as heterosexual. Furthermore, they are very diverse with respect to health, which can influence their ability to maintain their autonomy and overall well-being. One significant challenge is retirement. For most people, work does not just pay the bills; it is also a key aspect of our personal identity. Adjusting to retirement, which can lead to a loss of income and the corresponding loss of status, can prove to be a difficult process. The death of a long-term partner is another significant transition, as people lose their main source of companionship and support.

A distinction is often drawn between the third and fourth ages of life in modern societies. The third age covers the years from fifty to seventyfour, when people continue to lead active independent lives, increasingly free from day-to-day parenting responsibilities and the labour market. Many in this group have the time and finances to be active consumers. By contrast, the so-called fourth age refers to the later years of life when people's independence and ability to care for themselves become more seriously challenged.

Contrary to the stereotype of the wealthy, property-rich, active pensioner, the fourth age of life can be a time of poverty, ill health and social isolation.

Inequality in old age

Although they are a diverse group, in general, older people have long been more materially disadvantaged than other segments of the population. For instance, in 2007, about one in six (17 per cent) retired persons in the twenty-seven countries of the European Union was at risk of poverty, compared with 8 per cent of those in employment. The highest risk of poverty for the over sixty-fives was found in the Baltic states, the UK and Cyprus. Only in Poland was the median disposable income of this age group quite similar or just below that of the under sixty-fives (Eurostat 2010: 321–2).

However, since the 2008 financial crash, older people's relative position in the EU has generally improved. By 2013, those over sixtyfive were less at risk of poverty and social exclusion than either the overall EU population or children and young people in twenty of the twenty-eight EU countries. It seems that the brunt of the economic recession and austerity measures fell on other vulnerable groups in already

precarious jobs and employment sectors. For most older people, state pension provision and other measures targeted at older people protected many from the worst effects (Eurostat 2015a).

The inequalities of class, race and gender are often exacerbated when a person stops work, so the added inequality of later life means that older women, minorities and manual workers are poorer than peer equivalents in middle age. The ability to build up a private occupational or personal pension during working life is one of the key determinants of income inequality among the elderly. Consequently, it is older men who were previously employed as professionals or managers who tend to have the highest gross weekly income in later life.

We look at poverty among older people in more detail in [chapter 11](#), 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

The feminization of later life

Across the world, women generally live longer than men. Because of this, widowhood is the norm for older women. In 2004, for example, almost half of women over the age of sixty-five, and four-fifths of women aged eighty-five and over in the UK, were widowed (ONS 2004). In mid-2008, there were more than twice as many women aged eighty-five or over (914,000) as men (422,000), and this numerical predominance of women has been described as the 'feminization of later life' ([figure 14.3](#)) (ONS 2010a: 3).

The main reason for the shifting proportion of women is because so many young men died during the First World War (1914–18). The women of this generation began to reach retirement age in 1961, which produced a sharp rise in the sex ratio imbalance among older people. Projections to 2050 suggest a levelling off of the gender imbalance (or 'sex ratio') for the sixty-five to seventy-nine age range, with feminization shifting into the rapidly growing eighty-plus age group.

One reason for this is the more rapid fall in mortality of men over the age of sixty-five during the second half of the twentieth century. Figure 14.3 uses 'age pyramids' to depict the shifting pattern of the sex ratio across the European population from 1950 to 2050.
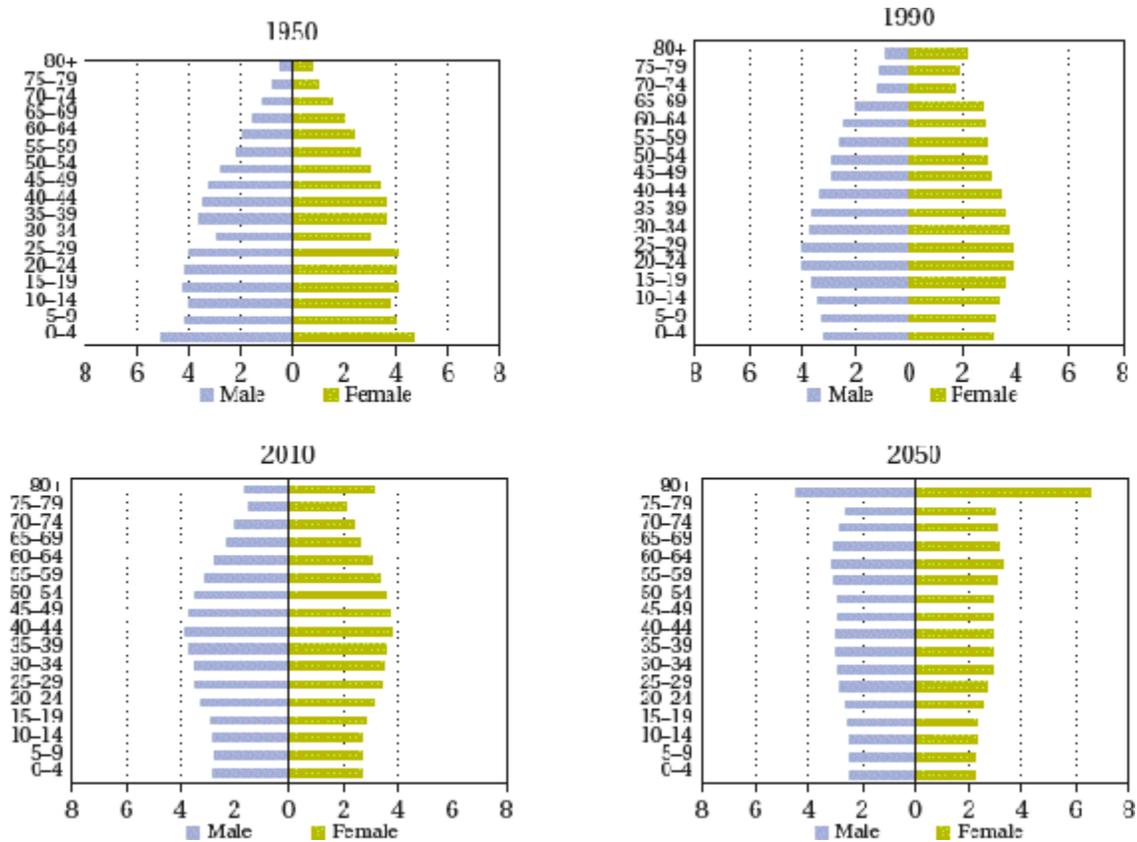
Figure 14.3 European age pyramids, 1950, 1990, 2010 and 2050 (projected)

Source: Adapted from Eurostat (2010: 167).

'Feminization' is not without its problems, however. Older women are more likely than their male contemporaries to be poor. In most countries, women are far less likely to have the same pension entitlements as men because of the gender gap in pay and the loss of lifetime earnings associated with caring for children and relatives. In 2007–8, for example, 42 per cent of single, older women in the UK had only the state pension compared with 31 per cent of single men. More than half of single male pensioners (54 per cent) had some form of occupational pension on top of their state pension, but just 27 per cent

of single female pensioners had any income at all from a private pension (ONS 2010a: 118).

The living situations of older men and women also have a gender dimension. One study of a selection of European countries found that women tend to grow old alone, while men grow old with a partner (Delbès et al. 2006). In addition, older women were twice as likely as men to live in an institution. The authors suggest that perhaps men find it more difficult to deal with their partners' health problems than do women. There are also some differences between Northern and Southern Europe. For instance, 56 per cent of Finnish women and 59 per cent of German women live alone after the age of seventy-five, compared with just 30 per cent of Portuguese women.

Cultural and policy differences may partly explain such findings. Southern European countries tend to see 'multigenerational co-residence' as the preferred option for keeping older relatives at home, while Northern European states have better developed welfare services, which perform some of the same functions but can lead to individuals living alone. This is just one aspect of the gendered pattern of care within the older population.

Age and ethnicity

Berthoud (1998) found that the incomes of older people from minority ethnic groups in the UK tend to be lower than those of their majority ethnic counterparts, and reliance on means-tested benefits is greater. A government survey of the three-year period 2015–18 found that black pensioner families had the lowest average incomes and were most likely to be in receipt of income-related state benefits. In real terms this means that, while the average gross weekly income of pensioner families in the UK was £533, the average for black pensioner families was just £371 and that for Asian pensioner families £387 (DWP 2019). White British pensioner families had higher average income from the state pension, occupational pensions and personal pensions. The data show that, in the twenty years since Berthoud's 1998 study, the structured pattern of ethnic disadvantage in the UK remained unchanged.

Older people from ethnic minorities are also disadvantaged in other wealth measures, such as car-ownership and housing tenure, though certain groups, such as Indians and Chinese, have rates of home-ownership that are comparable to that of white populations. In general, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis in the UK have higher rates of poverty compared with other groups, and this pattern is continued into later life. Why is this the case?

Ginn and Arber (2000) found that older Asian women in the UK were particularly disadvantaged in relation to incomes in old age. Retired minority ethnic individuals are often unable to supplement their state pension as the kind of employment in which they have been engaged is less likely to offer a private pension scheme. In 2007, almost three-quarters of the white population were in receipt of an occupational pension compared with fewer than half of the Asian/Asian British and black/black British populations (DWP 2007). The situation may improve with the introduction of the new UK 'autoenrolment' system, which makes it compulsory for small businesses to contribute towards and enrol employees into a pension. This change will not necessarily help many Pakistani and Bangladeshi workers, however, who are more likely to be self-employed than other minority ethnic groups (Vlachantoni et al. 2015).

The lack of a private pension reflects shorter employment records in Britain for the largely migrant older ethnic population, discrimination in the labour market, the limited availability and type of jobs found in the areas where minorities have settled, and sometimes a lack of fluency in English. For older women in some specific minority groups, economic disadvantage may also result from cultural norms acting as a barrier to employment earlier in life. Such patterns of structured disadvantage can be found among many other ethnic minority populations in Europe and internationally.

Growing old: competing explanations

Sociologists and social gerontologists have offered a number of theories regarding the nature of ageing. Some of the earliest theories emphasized individual adaptation to changing social roles as a person

grows older. Later theories focused on how social structures shape the lives of older people and on the concept of the life course. The most recent theories have been more multifaceted, concentrating on the ways in which older people actively create their lives within specific institutional contexts.

First-generation theories: functionalism

Functionalist theories were the earliest to offer an explanation of ageing, a reflection of the fact that this perspective was dominant in sociology during the 1950s and 1960s. Functionalism discussed how individuals adjusted to changing social roles as they aged and how those roles were useful to society, assuming that ageing brings with it physical and psychological decline (Hendricks 1992). Parsons argued that societies need to find roles for older people consistent with their advanced age and expressed concern that the USA, in particular, with its emphasis on youth, had failed to provide adequate roles that took advantage of the wisdom and maturity of older citizens. Traditional roles (such as work) have to be abandoned, and new forms of productive activity (such as volunteer service) need to be identified.

Parsons's ideas anticipated <u>disengagement theory</u>, which suggests that it is functional for society to remove people from their traditional roles when they grow older, freeing up space for new generations (Cumming and Henry 1961; Estes et al. 1992). According to this perspective, given the increasing frailty, illness and dependency of older people, allowing them to occupy traditional roles which they are no longer capable of adequately performing becomes dysfunctional for society as a whole.

Disengagement is deemed functional for society because it opens up roles to younger people, who will carry them out with fresh energy and new skills. Disengagement is also assumed to be functional for older people, as it enables them to take on less taxing roles consistent with advancing age and declining health. A number of older studies reported that a large majority feel good about retiring, which they claim raises morale and increases happiness (Palmore 1985; Howard et al. 1986). However, more recent policy changes to raise the state pension age from sixty-five years to sixty-seven, sixty-eight or later will impact on functionalist ideas of disengagement. Rather than looking forward to

retirement as purely a period of increased leisure and more time with the family, many retirees may now expect a 'partial retirement', which includes some paid work in the formal economy (Rix 2008: 130). This means that older people may well stay 'engaged' until very late in life.

One problem with disengagement theory is that it takes for granted the prevailing stereotype that later life necessarily involves frailty, illness and dependence. Critics of functionalism argue that it emphasizes the need for older people to adapt to existing conditions, but they do not question whether the circumstances faced by older people are fair or just. Similarly, many older people now live active, healthy lives and are able to continue in their adult roles for much longer than the present default retirement age. In reaction to functionalism, another group of theorists emerged out of the conflict tradition of sociology (Hendricks 1992).

Second-generation theories: age stratification and life course theory

From the mid-1970s, two of the most important new contributions were *age stratification theory* and the *life course model* (Estes et al. 2003). Age stratification theory looks at the role and influence of social structures, such as state policy, on the process of individual ageing and the wider stratification of older people in society. One important aspect of age stratification theory is the concept of *structural lag* (Riley et al. 1994). This provides an account of how structures do not keep pace with changes in the population and in individuals' lives. For example, in many European countries, when the retirement age was set at sixty-five soon after the Second World War, life expectancy and quality of life for older people was considerably lower than it is today. Only recently, partly as a consequence of economic recession, have governments considered raising the compulsory retirement age or scrapping it altogether.

The life course perspective also moved beyond looking at ageing in terms of individual adjustment. This perspective views ageing as one phase of a whole lifetime shaped by the historical, social, economic and environmental factors that occurred at earlier ages. Thus the life course model views ageing as a process that continues from birth to death,

which contrasts with earlier theories focusing solely on the elderly as a distinctive group. Life course theory bridges micro- and macrosociology in examining the relationships between psychological states, social structures and social processes (Elder 1974).

Third-generation theories: political economy

One of the most important strands in the study of ageing in recent years has been the *political economy perspective* pioneered by Carroll Estes (Estes et al. 2003). Political economy theory provides an account of the role of the state and capitalism as contributing to systems of domination and the marginalization of older people.

Political economy theory focuses on the role of economic and political systems in shaping and reproducing the prevailing power arrangements and inequalities in society. Social policy – in income, health or social security, for example – is understood as the result of social struggles, conflicts and the dominant power relations of the time. Policy affecting older people reflects the stratification of society by gender, race and class. Hence, the phenomena of ageing and old age are directly related to the larger society in which they are situated and cannot be considered in isolation from other social forces (Minkler and Estes 1991). Understanding old age – and, of course, all other life course stages – therefore requires that we grasp the concept of intersectionality – the way that major social divisions overlap or intersect to produce complex patterns of inequality and advantage.

Intersectionality is discussed in several chapters, notably chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', and chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

The politics of ageing

Is there a global ageing crisis?

Discussions of the ageing crisis are commonplace today, and there is little doubt that the shifting age distribution of societies presents challenges for all countries. One way of understanding this is to consider the dependency ratio – the relationship between the number of *children* and *retired people* (considered 'dependent') and the number of *people of working age* (aged fifteen to sixty-four). However, the 'old-age dependency ratio' can also be distinguished from the 'young-age ratio', and it is the former with which we are concerned here. The old-age dependency ratio is usually expressed as a percentage.

As birth and fertility rates declined in Europe and other developed countries, fewer young people meant that young-age dependency ratios almost halved, from 41 per cent in 1960 to 23 per cent by 2005. But, as fertility rates have declined and people increasingly live longer, the old-age dependency ratio rose from 14 to 23 per cent over the same period. By contrast, in Africa the total dependency ratio (young- and old-age dependency) rose as high as 80 per cent in 2005, mainly because of the very high proportion of young people in the population (Eurostat 2010: 152–3). The old-age dependency ratio of the then twenty-eight members of the EU continued to increase, and by 2017 it had reached 29.9 per cent or 3:1, just over three people of working age for every one person over the age of sixty-five (Eurostat 2018b). As figure 14.4 shows, this ratio is set to continue to increase until 2055, when it is projected to level off, but at a higher level, just over 50 per cent.

Changes in the dependency ratio have several causes. Modern agriculture, improved sanitation systems, better epidemic control and medicines have all contributed to a decline in mortality throughout the world. In most societies today, especially in the developed world, fewer children die in infancy and more adults survive into later life. As the proportion of older people continues to grow, the demands on social services and health systems increase, and the growth in life expectancy means that pensions will need to be paid for more years than they are at present. The working population funds the programmes that support the older population, and, as the old-age dependency ratio increases, some argue that greater strain will be placed on resources.

In the light of such projections, some scholars and politicians reasoned that the state pension age (SPA) should be raised. In the wake of the 2008 financial crisis these arguments gained credence, and the need to cut public spending became more urgent. As a result, many governments announced plans to raise the SPA. In the UK, it will rise in stages until 2044–6, when it will reach sixty-eight for both men and women. Clearly, redefining 'working age' and 'pensionable age' in this way will impact dependency ratios (ONS 2010b: 17).

Figure 14.5 divides the old-age dependency ratio for the UK into age bands to show the effects of an ageing population and changes to the SPA into the 2050s. As the SPA increases are introduced, affecting those in the sixty to sixty-four and sixty-five to sixty-seven age bands, the overall dependency ratio will level off (and even fall slightly) around 2021, before rising again. Thus the demographic ageing trend remains the strongest long-run force shaping dependency ratios. In the UK, some 40 per cent of those of state pensionable age in 2008 were aged seventy-five or over, but by 2058 this age group will make up 67 per cent (ONS 2010b: 17–18). Other governments are planning similar changes.

Some critics argue that this 'dependency talk' is unnecessarily alarmist and does not accurately depict the reality of demographic change. It also risks reinforcing negative stereotypes of older people that stigmatize them further. Mullan (2002) argued that those who believe the ageing population is a ticking time bomb are falling for a series of myths. For example, he maintains that an ageing population will not necessarily mean an exponential rise in ill health and dependency. Ageing is not an illness; most older people are neither ill nor disabled, and many continue to work after the formal retirement age. People live longer because of the improvement in living conditions over the past century. Categorizing older people as a 'dependent population' alongside children merely constructs this social group as 'a problem'. And, though not all older people are uniformly fit and financially secure, later life has changed very much for the better for many people (Gilleard and Higgs 2005).
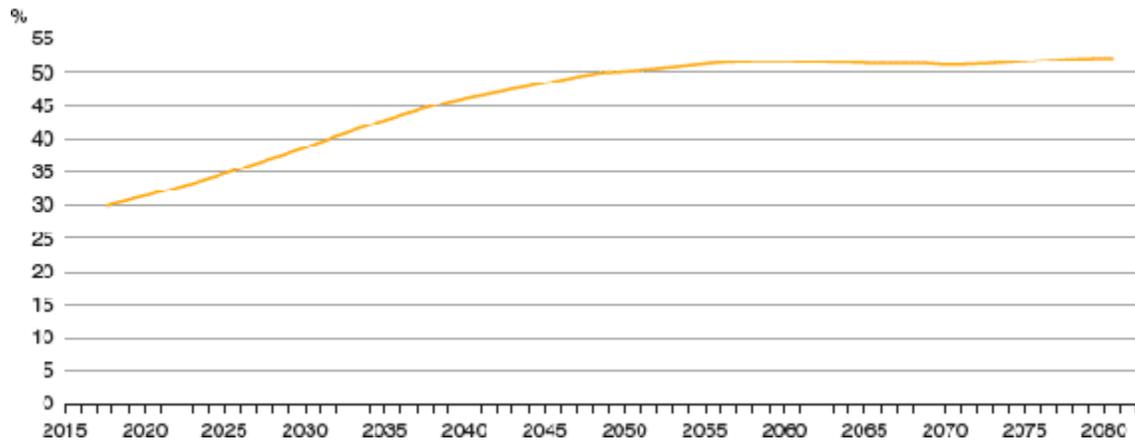
Figure 14.4 Projected old-age dependency ratio, EU-28, 2017–80

Source: Eurostat (2018b).
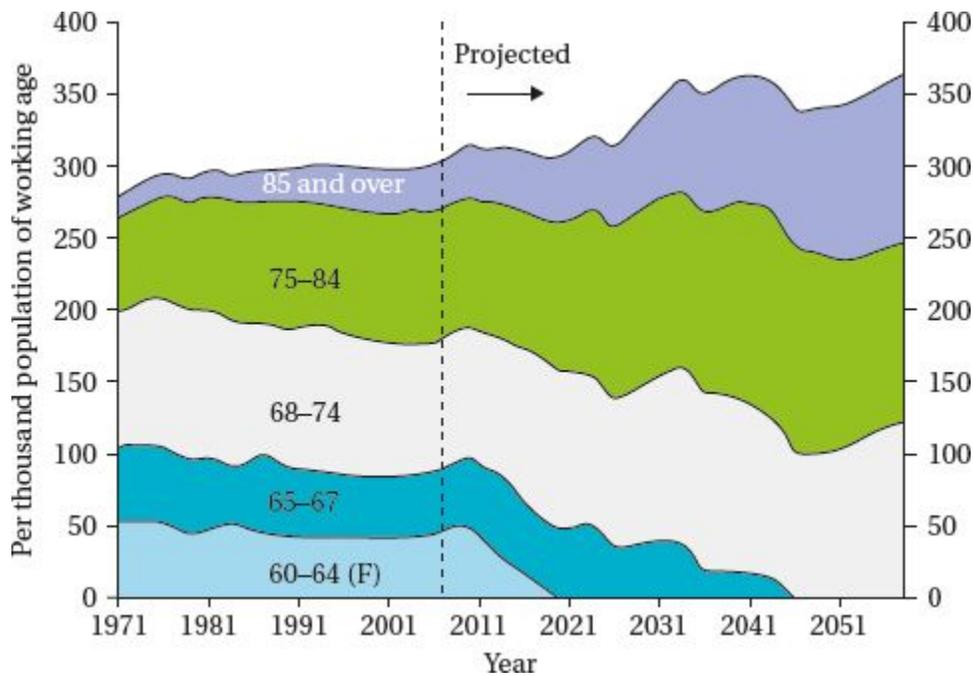
Figure 14.5 Actual and projected components of UK dependency ratio for population of pensionable ages, 1971–2058

Source: ONS (2010b: 18).

For some sociologists, there are good reasons to believe that the very concept of dependency should be reconsidered (Arber and Ginn 2004). First, the age ranges used to define dependency in the past no longer reflect patterns of employment in the developed countries. Fewer young people enter the labour market to work full-time at the age of sixteen, instead staying in formal education for much longer. Many

workers also leave the labour market before the age of sixty-five or move into and out of work at various stages of the life course, and more women than ever before are in paid employment, offsetting the shorter duration of male employment.

Second, activity that benefits the economy is not confined to active participation in the formal work sector. Evidence from the UK shows that, rather than being a burden, older people make many productive economic and social contributions. They provide unpaid and informal care to less able partners and children, reducing the cost to the state of health- and personal care. They are a major source of care provision for grandchildren, allowing their children to work, and are also highly active in voluntary organizations. Older people are an important source of financial support for grown-up children, providing them with loans, educational fees, gifts and help for housing – especially significant in an 'age of austerity' and less generous welfare benefits.

Global society 14.2 China's ageing population

In October 2015, the Chinese government announced that it was ending its longstanding policy of one child per family and that couples would be allowed to have a second child. The one-child policy has been in place since 1979 and was designed to slow the birth rate. In 1979 the population was close to 1 billion, and the Communist Party saw continuing population growth as a brake on their attempts to increase productivity and economic growth.

Chinese couples who did not adhere to the policy were often fined; others lost their jobs, and some women underwent forced abortions. Given the widespread preference for a male child, the policy is also held to be responsible for China's gender imbalance, as some couples gave up their first female child to an orphanage or aborted the pregnancy in order to try and ensure their only child was a boy. However, over time, some provinces, rural areas and regions had already effectively adopted a less rigid enforcement regime. For example, rural families were allowed a second child if the first was female.

The ending of the one-child policy seems to be a recognition that China has an ageing population and the country needs more young workers if the economy is to continue its previous rapid improvement. As figure 14.6 shows, at around 38 per cent, China's old-age dependency ratio in 2017 was among the lowest globally, but by 2055 this is forecast to rise rapidly, to over 75 per cent, far higher than the global average (UNICEF 2017). Yet one consequence of the one-child policy is that small families have now become normal and, for many, the preferred choice, as people look to enjoy consumer benefits from integration in the global capitalist system. After many years of trying to control and manage its population, China now faces similar demographic issues to those faced by other ageing societies.
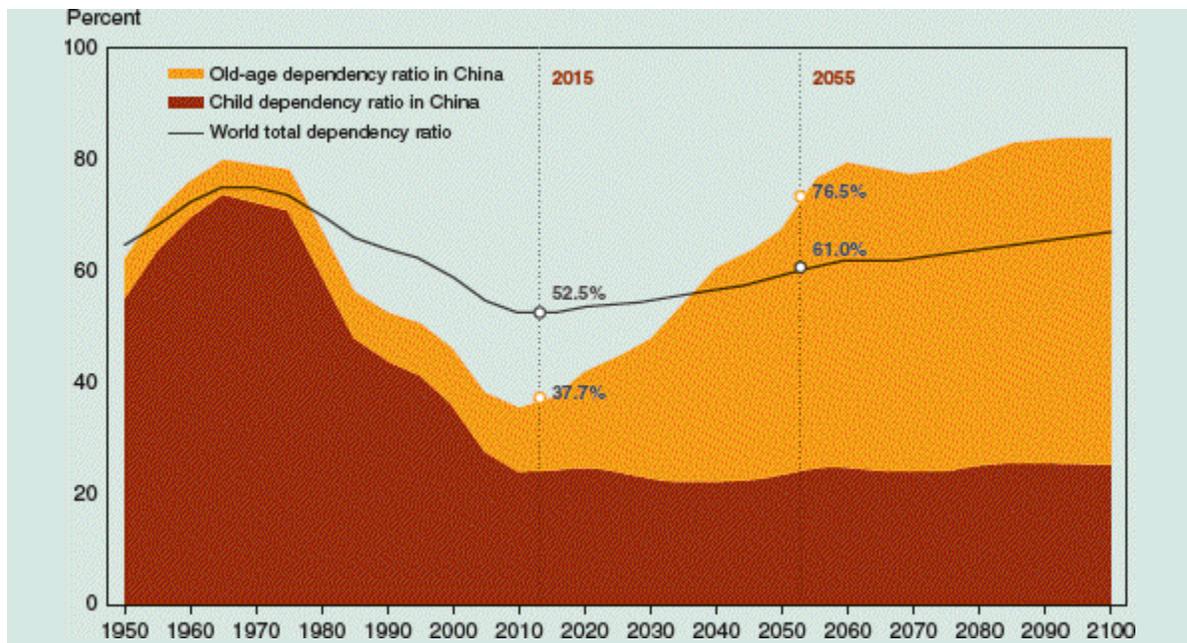
Figure 14.6 China's dependency ratio, 1950–2100 (projected)

Source: UNICEF (2017).

THINKING CRITICALLY

China's demographic changes show that government policy can shape population trends. Given the forecast of a rising old-age dependency ratio, how might China's policy shift to keep this down to a manageable level?

Ageism

Ageism is discrimination against people purely on the basis of their age and is therefore akin to sexism or racism, though it does not apply only to older people. For example, young people's views have often been seen as not worthy of attention, and therefore their voices should not be heard in adult discussion or policy debates. However, the bulk of sociological research is concerned with discrimination against older people. There is a crucial difference between ageism and other forms of discrimination, in that we will all age and become older. Yet, although sexist and racist jokes are no longer publicly acceptable, jokes about old

age remain widespread and 'normal', as birthday cards whose humour trades on ideas of increasing decrepitude clearly illustrate.

Macnicol (2010: 3–4) argues that ageism can be seen in three areas of social life: social relations and attitudes, employment, and the distribution of goods and services. As we have seen, there are many stereotypes of older people in circulation in society. Many young people believe that a majority of those aged over seventy are in care homes or hospitals and that a high proportion suffer from dementia. In fact, most live in private dwellings and fewer than 10 per cent of those aged sixty-five to eighty have symptoms of dementia. Although erroneous, such views feed negative attitudes and elder abuse in both domestic and institutional settings.

In employment, it is often believed that older workers are less able and competent than younger ones, though firms that actively seek older workers report their superior productivity and attendance records compared with younger workers. Psychological research also suggests that older workers score more highly than younger ones on reliability, productivity and day-to-day cognitive performance (Schmiedek et al. 2013). As consumers, older people may also find that they pay more for their holiday and car insurance policies and are treated differently in healthcare settings, purely on grounds of their age. Over the last few decades many governments have put forward or implemented proposals to ban age discrimination, covering recruitment, job training, entry to higher education, promotion, pay, job retention and – importantly – retirement rights.

Bytheway's (1995) account of ageism draws on social constructionism. Bytheway questions the terms 'old age' and 'the elderly', arguing that we presume these have a universal reality that they do not, in fact, have. What exactly do we mean by the term 'old age'? Is there any scientific evidence that something exists that can be called old age? If it does exist, how do people enter it and 'become' elderly? For Bytheway, the categories we use to describe the ageing process are themselves ageist. They are social constructions which legitimize the separation and management of people on the basis of their chronological age.

The ideological and value differences between older and younger people may contribute to a generation gap which some scholars argue has become wider. In this sense, ageism may be a unique form of discrimination, as older people were once young and younger people will become old. However, recognition of this fact does not appear to be enough, in itself, to prevent ageism. Some theorists also argue that a key reason for ageism lies in the perceived threat older people pose to younger generations.

Jokes at the expense of older people are common and usually pass without comment, but would this be acceptable if it referred to any other social group?

See chapter 5, 'The Environment', and chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', for discussions of social constructionism.

For younger people, especially in Western cultures, with their valorization of youth and youthfulness, old age, with its unwanted physical changes, is something to be feared (known as *gerontophobia* –

fear of ageing), and discussions of ageing are generally avoided. Old people therefore represent that fear for young people and are constant reminders of their own future (Greenberg et al. 2004). However, older people are also reminders of our own eventual mortality, and modern societies tend to hide the process of dying 'behind the scenes' to avoid having to face up to the inevitability of death. Therefore, a prerequisite for eliminating ageism would seem to be a more open, public, intergenerational discussion of issues around death, dying and bereavement. In the final section, we will see whether this is a realistic prospect.

Death, dying and bereavement

The sociology of death and dying

Sociologists have only recently become interested in the universal human experiences of dying, death and bereavement. One reason why the study of death and dying has not been more central to sociology is that death marks the *end* of an individual's participation in the social world and seems to lie outside sociology's main concerns. Societies continue to develop even though individuals die, and social development, rather than death, has been the focus. Another reason is that, within modern societies themselves, death and dying have long been 'taboo subjects', not topics for polite conversation. One early research study was Glaser and Strauss's *Awareness of Dying* (1965), which looked at the experience of death and dying in a US hospital's cancer ward, but this was an exception rather than the norm.

Since the 1990s, the neglect of death and dying has been rectified by the development of a new research field – the sociology of death, dying and bereavement (Clark 1993). One of the founders of this field is the British sociologist Tony Walter (1994, 1999), whose work focuses on the ways in which societies organize death, dying and mourning. How do societies care for the hundreds of thousands of dying people? Practically, how do they deal with this number of dead bodies? What support is provided for bereaved relatives? What beliefs are held about the prospects for the dead when their earthly lives are over? The answers to such questions turn out to be quite varied. Anthropologists have long studied cultural differences in death rituals in small-scale societies and within developing countries, but the modern sociology of death and dying has concentrated primarily on the developed world. Yet even here there are many cultural differences. Nonetheless, sociologists have been struck by some key, *shared* features of modern industrial societies in relation to their handling of death.

Theorizing death and dying

One main aspect of modern societies is that, until quite recently, death tended to be hidden 'behind the scenes' of social life, while in previous times a majority of people experienced the final process of dying while at home, with family and friends in close attendance. This is still the case in many non-industrialized societies today. But in most modern societies death typically occurs in hospitals and nursing homes – relatively impersonal settings that are distanced from the mainstream of social life. Bodies are then moved to different parts of the buildings, thereby maintaining a physical distance between living patients, their families and the dead (Ariès 1965).

In *The Loneliness of the Dying* (1985: 8), Norbert Elias connects this hiding away of death and dying to the increasing life expectancy we looked at in earlier sections. He argues that

> The attitude to dying and the image of death in our societies cannot be completely understood without reference to this relative security and predictability of individual life and the correspondingly increased life expectancy. Life grows longer, death is further postponed. The sight of dying and dead people is no longer commonplace. It is easier in the normal course of life to forget death.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

14.2 An ageless future?

In *Stories of Ageing* (2000), Hepworth uses literature to encourage his readers to 'explore fiction as an imaginative resource for understanding variations in the meaning of the experience of ageing in society'. In the extract below, Hepworth discusses how science and technology could radically alter how we understand ageing.

Outside the realms of legend and the romantic imagination there was until very recently only one future of ageing in Western culture if one was lucky to live long enough to grow old: the Christian vision of the inevitable decline of the human body, death and an afterlife of either Heaven or Hell. The dualistic separation of the body from the soul in Christian thought regards the ageing of the body in the temporal world as a brief testing ground for eternal spiritual life beyond the veil. The corruption of the flesh frees the soul or essential self for an other-worldly existence out of time. Heaven is the compensation for graceful or virtuous ageing and not looking for pacts with the Devil to prolong a youthfully active life.

But times are rapidly changing, and the emergence of modern scientific medicine and technology has offered an alternative promise of release from the ageing body in this world rather than the next (Katz 1996). One of the interesting features of this development is that contemporary models of an ageless future have become predominantly biological rather than essentially spiritual (Cole 1992). The prevailing belief now is that it is the science of the biological body, and not the religion of the eternal immaterial soul, which will arrest the process of ageing and extend the period of youthful life…. The widespread faith in the limitless potential of science to solve human problems encourages us to turn expectantly to medical science to transform ageing from the natural termination of the life course into a disease, which is 'potentially curable'. One of these days ageing will disappear from the human agenda when

cures for the illnesses associated with growing older have been found and ailing and malfunctioning body parts can be replaced.

One way of defeating the ageing process is for humans to become cyborgs or to assume the 'post-human' bodies of partly biological and partly technological beings (Featherstone and Renwick 1995).... Any part of the internal body which causes distress in later life will be removed and replaced with a genetically engineered or transplanted substitute. The story of the ageing body will thus become not a story of how individuals cope or come to terms with its limitations but science fiction come true. The body will be a machine and the meaning of ageing may cease to be a matter of concern.

Source: Hepworth (2000: 124–5).

THINKING CRITICALLY

Thinking sociologically, if the cyborg future discussed above ever became reality, what social, political and economic consequences might follow? Would a cyborg future be generally positive or negative for social solidarity?

FOR THE PERFECT AGE
LOOK REJUVENATED
IRRESISTIBLY RADIANT

BECAUSE YOU'RE WORTH IT.

AGE PERFECT

Grow another year better.
Helen Mirren

3 for 2 on L'oréal Paris Age Perfect
Shop online at Boots.com.

L'ORÉAL
PARIS

Boots
let's feel good

Consumer societies promote a bewildering range of products aimed at 'delaying' or 'combating' the physical signs of ageing. Do youthful ideals make the older idea of 'growing old gracefully' less socially acceptable, particularly for women?

However, Elias sees that the modern way of death and dying presents emotional problems for people reaching this stage of their lives. Although hospitals provide the best available nursing care, scientific medicine and use of the latest technologies, the patient's contact with family members and friends is usually seen as inconveniencing treatment and care regimes and is therefore restricted to short visits at specific times of day. This rational management of patients may well deny people the essential emotional comfort of being close to their loved ones, which they actually need most in the final period of life. In modern societies, says Elias, dying can be a very lonely process indeed.

Zygmunt Bauman (1992) offers another perspective on the distancing of modern people from death and dying. He argues that modern societies deny and defer death long into the future by turning the

ultimate and inevitable ending of life into a multitude of smaller, 'nonultimate' and potentially resolvable 'health hazards' and illnesses. Mortality is therefore effectively 'deconstructed', which brings the endless defensive battles against ageing and death right into the centre of daily life. People become used to treating, curing and managing their chronic illnesses, for example.

In particular, modern societies place a high value on youthfulness, and the quest to remain 'young' – both physically and emotionally (staying 'young at heart') – takes up a large part of many people's lives. As we noted above, as the demand for youthfulness increases, there are now huge markets for anti-ageing treatments, vitamin supplements, cosmetic surgery and fitness equipment. Bauman describes such actions as part of a 'life strategy', though, of course, people may not always acknowledge that their attempts to stay young and fit are ultimately futile defensive actions to avoid acknowledging their own mortality.

Since the mid-1990s, sociologists have noted significant changes in the way that death, dying and bereavement are dealt with in modern societies. First, the hospice movement, which started in the 1960s, aims to offer an alternative to the impersonality of hospitals for terminally ill people. The first modern hospice was founded in London in 1967 by Dame Cicely Saunders, and many hospices in the UK and the USA have a Christian basis. The UK has more than 200 hospices caring for around 200,000 people, based on the principle that death and dying are a natural part of life and that the quality of life for dying people should be as positive as possible (Brindle 2018). Hospices encourage family and friends to continue to play a part in the patient's life, even in the final stages. Saunders actually believed that the pain-relief regimes within hospices made euthanasia unnecessary. The growth of more personalized forms of care for terminally ill people may resolve some of the issues of impersonality of end-of-life care identified by Elias.

Assisted dying – a developing debate

Should human rights extend to the right to die? Should medical professionals be expected to assist people who wish to die to do so,

even if their basic oath requires them to 'do no harm'? Issues of euthanasia, assisted dying and the 'right to die' have become very widely debated across the developed societies. While euthanasia refers to deliberate intervention (usually by doctors) to end life in order to relieve intractable suffering, assisted dying (sometimes called 'assisted suicide') occurs when one person helps another to take their own life by supplying them with the means to do so. That more people now seek a right to die is perhaps not surprising given the evidence presented earlier on the greying of societies, which, for some, brings with it extended periods of chronic illness or degenerative diseases such as Alzheimer's. For increasing numbers of people, the prospect of chronic pain, suffering and the loss of 'self' towards the end of life is not one they are prepared to accept.

In the USA in 1994, the state of Oregon passed the Death with Dignity Act, which allows medically diagnosed, terminally ill people (those with six months left to live) to request a lethal dose of medication. The legislation also includes some strict safeguards: only 'competent adults' can make the decision, patients themselves must make the request in writing, two witnesses must confirm the request, diagnosis must be confirmed by an independent professional, patients must administer the medication themselves, and any medical professionals can refuse to participate if they have moral objections. Euthanasia or assisted suicide has also been legalized or partially legalized in a growing number of countries, including Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Japan, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. A Swiss 'assisted suicide' organization, Dignitas, founded in 1998, has received much publicity for allowing foreign nationals to use their service. Between 1998 and 2019, 3,027 people took their lives by 'accompanied suicide' at Dignitas, 1,322 of them from Germany and 457 from Great Britain (Statista 2020).

The issue of a right to die is controversial, and moral opinion is polarized. In September 2015 the UK Parliament debated a bill that would have allowed some adults to die under medical supervision if they had been diagnosed as having less than six months to live. The bill was rejected by 330 votes to 118. Many MPs argued that medics should focus on prolonging life, not helping to end it. Rather than promoting

the right to die, better palliative care is suggested as a more humane or 'civilized' alternative (Forman 2008: 11–12). Others were concerned that legalizing assisted suicide may lead to undue pressure being placed on ill, mainly older people who want to avoid 'becoming a burden' on relatives and healthcare systems. In that situation, the idea that people 'freely choose' to take their own life is compromised. The concern is that assisted suicide, rather than being a last resort for people facing terminal illness and suffering, may spread to other, non-life-threatening conditions. For instance, disabled people may face increased discrimination and pressure.

Nonetheless, the demographic trends outlined in this chapter suggest that the voices of those seeking change will grow stronger as larger numbers of people come into contact with the impact of degenerative and terminal illnesses within their families and among their friends. It therefore seems likely that more societies will move to legalize assisted suicide, while in others a *de facto* decriminalization will occur as authorities decide not to prosecute those who assist close relatives to die – at least in cases where that wish has been clearly stated.

Destigmatizing death and dying

In the 2017 British Social Attitudes Survey, for the first time a majority of people (53 per cent) reported that they did not 'belong to any particular religion', a much higher proportion than the 31 per cent recorded in the first survey in 1983 (NatCen 2017). Perhaps this growing trend is one reason why, since the 1980s, more people are embarking on a quest for new, more informal mourning rituals to extend or replace the traditional religious rituals (Wouters 2002). This development represents an attempt by people to find new public rituals which match their individual and personal needs.

Some sociologists have described these changes as a 'postmodern' development (see chapter 3 for a discussion of postmodern social theory) in which more individualistic and diverse approaches to dealing with death and disposal are emerging (Bauman 1992; Walter 1994). For example, it is now common for people to personalize their own or their relatives' funerals: playing pop music, giving their own

speeches or insisting on colourful clothing rather than relying on the traditional rituals of the churches. It is also becoming more commonplace for relatives to mark road-accident deaths with flowers and memorabilia at the scene of a crash as an individual way of remembering the dead rather than, or in addition to, the ritual of attending a cemetery to tend the grave. Web-based memorials and tribute sites are also gaining in popularity, and new debates have arisen concerning the ownership of people's online legacy and how their presence on social media should be dealt with after death.

Along with the spread of the hospice movement, the informalization of mourning rituals may be one more indication that the stigma around the taboo subjects of ageing, death and dying is being eroded. Similarly, debates around assisted dying and the 'right to die' show that more people are considering their own inevitable death and thinking through what might constitute 'a good death' for them. The industrialized countries have often been described as 'death denying societies', but, as we have seen above, there are now clear signs of cultural and social change in their handling of dying, death and disposal.

Conclusion

Despite some signs of stagnation in very recent years, the lengthening of the average lifespan has called into question the idea of fixed, age-based life stages and strengthened studies that adopt the concept of the life course. Hunt (2017) points out that age categories, such as 'youth', 'mid-life' and 'old', can still provide us with a clear point of departure for understanding life course development, but only once they are shorn of their previously deterministic quality. When do people stop being 'children'? When does 'middle age' begin? How do we know when we have reached 'old age'? Even to ask such questions shows that the human life course is fluid and open to change, and it is this recognition that leads researchers in the direction of a sociological approach.

Making sense of the changing life course also necessitates linking the lifespan, with its various phases and age-related markers, to broader social, economic, political and technological change. Green (2017: 9–11) lists at least the following as significant in this regard: reorganization of 'the family' and living arrangements, shifting gendered expectations and roles, the demise of traditional class-based solidarity and rising individualization, urbanization and globalization, the digital revolution in communications, major medical advances impacting on the average lifespan, increasing consumerism, and the shift to a service-based economy alongside sectoral casualization and a general feminization of the workforce. As we have seen throughout the chapter, as societies change, sometimes quite radically, so too do life course phases and the lifespan itself.

The bulk of life course studies have been concerned with the situation in the developed world, particularly the industrialized, Western countries. Perhaps the next stage for such studies will be to test the life course concept in comparative research across the world's societies. In particular, how is globalization influencing the life course in developing countries, and are the kinds of economic, technological and social changes outlined above having a similar impact in the Global South? Comparative studies of this kind would be a useful addition to what is

already known about the real-world consequences of persistent global inequality.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. What is meant by the 'social self'? Explain why Mead's theory constitutes a genuinely sociological theory of self-formation.

2. Reflecting on your own or your children's early development, to what extent does Piaget's theory of child development fit your experience? Is it possible to say that there are *universal* stages of socialization?

3. Describe the process(es) through which people acquire a gender identity. With reference to gender identities today, do these support or refute the contention that socialization is a series of opportunities for interaction which produce varied outcomes?

4. Why do sociologists prefer the concept of life course to that of the life cycle? Why might the latter be unnecessarily limited for empirical research?

5. Are there any specific stages or life transitions left in the developed societies? In what ways do these differ across gender, social class and ethnic group?

6. Explain the difference between a cohort and a generation. In what ways are individuals influenced and shaped by being part of a specific cohort or generation?

7. What is meant by *social ageing*? How is social ageing different from other types of ageing?

8. What is meant by the *greying* of Western societies and the *dependency ratio*? On what grounds do critics argue against the pessimistic conclusions of age dependency theories?

9. Activity theories suggest that continuing engagement with work into old age is an important source of vitality. Using ideas from functionalist theory, discuss why disengagement may also have advantages that stand to be lost to both individuals and the wider social structure?

10. Conflict theories differ from both of these perspectives. How are older people materially disadvantaged? Suggest ways in which the concept of intersectionality can help us to understand the differential experience of old age.

11. Provide some examples of ageism. Given that older people have long been afforded respect as a source of experience-based wisdom, why do older people find themselves victims of ageism today?

12. What is meant by the *informalization* of contemporary mourning rituals? List some of the shifting practices that have emerged in recent decades in relation to death, dying and bereavement.

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

The life course perspective has added to our understanding of many aspects of life, from family relationships to shifting patterns of working life and individual careers. Over recent years there has also been increasing interest in residential mobility – that is, whether people move their place of residence, how often they do so, and why. Given recent sociological theories of individualization and significant changes in working lives, we may expect residential mobility to become more common. The article below discusses this issue. Read the paper and answer the questions.

> Falkingham, J., Sage, J., Stone, J., and Vlachantoni, A. (2016) 'Residential Mobility across the Life Course: Continuity and Change across Three Cohorts in Britain', *Advances in Life Course Research*, 30: 111–23; www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S104026081630034X.

1. What methods are used in this analysis? How would you characterize the research – what kind of study is this?

2. Describe the population sample and the three birth cohorts.

3. According to the authors, what are the main 'triggers' for residential mobility? Which of these can be said to be the main trigger?

4. Discuss the paper's findings in relation to gender and residential mobility. How can we explain these findings with reference to differential cohort effects?

5. The paper notes that social theories may be helpful for explaining some of its findings. Which social theories are referred to and how can they be used to strengthen our understanding of contemporary residential mobility in Britain?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Peter Kaufman, professor of sociology at the State University New York (SUNY), began his essay, 'A Sociology of My Death', with the following statement:

> I'm dying. I don't mean this figuratively – like I'm dying of thirst or dying to visit Hawaii. I mean it quite literally. I have incurable, stage IV lung cancer. I was diagnosed in June 2017, a few months after my fiftieth birthday. My only symptom was a nagging, dry cough, but by the time the disease was detected the cancer had metastasized throughout my body.

The essay was published online on 14 September 2018 and Kaufman died on 19 November, at the age of fifty-one. You can read the blog entry here: www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2018/09/a-sociology-of-my-death.html. and more on Professor Kaufman here: https://sites.newpaltz.edu/news/2018/11/college-mourns-passing-of-peter-kaufman-professor-of-sociology/.

As we have seen in this chapter, sociologists have had insightful things to contribute to our understanding of death, dying and bereavement. Kaufman noted that sociology had been helpful to him, particularly by highlighting four themes: interdependence, social interactions, social inequality and impermanence. He wrote: '... being a sociologist has greatly influenced my thinking and contributed to my positive mindset. The sociologist Charles Lemert said that, "social theory is a basic survival skill."'

Consider how sociological theory and evidence and, more generally, the development of a sociological imagination could help individuals who are facing the end of their life. What exactly does sociology have to offer that might support Kaufman's suggestion? Read his essay alongside the relevant sections in this chapter and write a 1,000-word article exploring the practical and theoretical ways in which a sociological perspective may assist the dying and the bereaved.

⭐ <u>Society in the arts</u>

A basic sociological premise is that the individual life course is shaped by wider social structures, norms and values. Consequently, the patterns of the life course differ across societies and over time. As well as identifying elements of the life course in a society's legal framework, we should expect to see something of these life course patterns exhibited within the creative arts and entertainment.

Do your own research on how life course stages, such as childhood, young adulthood, adulthood and old age, are constructed through the rules and guidelines in relation to television programming, cinema and films, theatre, art exhibitions and classical/pop concerts. List the age guidelines and rules for these varied forms. Are these consistent across the broad range of media and cultural products? Would it be possible to understand a society's life course stages and boundaries from these guidelines?

Is the advent of digital media effectively 'changing the rules', particularly for online content? For example, what age-based rules and guidelines exist on YouTube, social media and online TV channels? Are society's authorities and legislators still catching up with the digital revolution, or might the digital media tell us something more significant about shifting life course stages?

▷ **Further reading**

Two excellent introductions to the sociology of the life course are Lorraine Green's (2017) *Understanding the Life Course: Sociological and Psychological Perspectives* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity) and Stephen Hunt's (2017) *The Life Course: A Sociological Introduction* (2nd edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan). Either of these would be an excellent place to begin your reading.

Bill Bytheway's (2011) *Unmasking Age: The Significance of Age for Social Research* (Bristol: Policy Press) is a stimulating read, using a variety of sources to address the central question 'what is age?'. Christopher Phillipson's (2013) *Ageing* (Cambridge: Polity) is an excellent introduction to debates in this field, while Martin Hyde and Paul Higgs's (2017) *Ageing and Globalisation* (Bristol: Policy Press) connects theories and evidence on ageing to theories of globalization.

A critical approach to the idea that an ageing society is inevitably problematic can be found in *The Myth of Generational Conflict: The Family and State in Ageing Societies* (2007), edited by Sara Arber and Claudine Attias-Donfut (London: Routledge). A comprehensive book which can be consulted on specific topics is Dale Dannefer and Chris Phillipson's edited collection (2015) *The Sage Handbook of Social Gerontology* (London: Sage), which covers just about every age-related subject you can think of.

Finally, anyone interested in sociological issues around death, dying and bereavement could try Glennys Howarth's (2006) *Death and Dying: A Sociological Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity). Then Neil Thompson and Gerry Cox's (2017) *Handbook of the Sociology of Death, Grief and Bereavement: A Guide to Theory and Practice* (Abingdon: Routledge) is an edited collection that covers a lot of ground.

For a collection of original readings on relationships and the life course, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Centre for Research on Families, Life course and Generations (FLaG) at the University of Leeds, UK:
https://flag.leeds.ac.uk/

World Health Organization – international resources on ageing and the life course:
www.who.int/ageing/en/

UNICEF – United Nations Children's Fund; contains many useful resources on children's experience around the world:
www.unicef.org

HelpAge International – a campaigning organization and a good source of information on ageing across the world:
www.helpage.org

Centre for Policy on Ageing (UK) – charity promoting the interests of older people through research and policy analysis:
www.cpa.org.uk/index.html

United Nations Programme on Ageing – focal point for the UN on all issues related to ageing:
www.un.org/development/desa/ageing/

Centre for Death and Society at the University of Bath, UK – since 2005, an interdisciplinary centre for research into death and dying:
www.bath.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-for-death-society/

British Sociological Association's (BSA) Study Group on the social aspects of death, dying and bereavement:
www.britsoc.co.uk/groups/study-groups/social-aspects-of-death-dying-and-bereavement-study-group/

CHAPTER 15

FAMILIES AND INTIMATE RELATIONSHIPS

CONTENTS

The digital revolution in communications has had a profound impact on dating behaviour across all age groups and sexualities.

How do you find love in the digital age? It's not easy, but fortunately there is a plethora of guidebooks which set out the basic rules of dating and finding a marriage partner. And though some of these are aimed at men, the vast majority target heterosexual women who are seeking 'the one'. But where to start?

One book setting out the 'new rules', *The Dating Dos and Don'ts for the Digital Generation*, says it is important to acknowledge that 'men and women are different. This fact may seem shocking because you were raised to think that men and women are equal and that women can do anything they want.' The authors recognize that women today have more opportunity than in the past, but:

Men and women are not the same romantically. Men love a challenge, while women love security. Men love to buy and sell companies as well as extreme sports like mountain climbing and bungee jumping, while women love to talk about their dates and watch romantic comedies.... A woman gets a text or e-mail from a guy she likes and forwards it to five girlfriends to analyze it. A guy gets a text, thinks about it for a second, and then turns back to the football game. (Fein and Schneider 2013)

For women, the key to dating success is therefore to 'play hard to get', but the digital world makes this ever more difficult as smartphones and similar devices mean we are all always available with nowhere to hide. 'Facebook, instant messaging, texting, and other social technologies have made it almost impossible for women to be elusive and mysterious.' This particular guide provides almost 250 pages of practical 'rules' on how to manage your digital life in order to stay mysterious, which means that, eventually, you can 'get your guy'.

What may be more shocking than being told that 'men and women are different' is the fact that guides such as this one still generate very healthy sales figures. Perhaps one part of an explanation for their popularity is that, despite the somewhat anachronistic language and traditional heterosexual assumptions, their central premise – that people are attracted first, then fall in love, then become a couple and/or get married – seems so obviously realistic. Yet this apparently 'natural' progression of emerging intimate relationships is, in fact, historically unusual.

In early modern Europe, royal and aristocratic marriages were very often arranged on political and economic grounds or to enhance a family's social status. And though 'arranged marriages' across the world are less common than once they were, in some South Asian communities they remain the norm. In all these cases, 'falling in love' is rarely thought of as a necessary prelude to marriage or starting a family, as material, familial, social status or pragmatic reasons take precedence. Only in modern times have love and sexuality come to be seen as closely connected. During the Middle Ages, very few people in Europe married purely for love. Spouses may have become close

companions, but this happened during the course of a marriage rather than being a necessary precursor. As Boswell argues (1995: xxi):

> In premodern Europe marriage usually began as a property arrangement, was in its middle mostly about raising children, and ended about love. Few couples in fact married 'for love', but many grew to love each other in time as they jointly managed their household, reared their offspring, and shared life's experiences. Nearly all surviving epitaphs to spouses evince profound affection. By contrast, in most of the modern West, marriage begins about love, in its middle is still mostly about raising children (if there are children), and ends – often – about property, by which point love is absent or a distant memory.

Only in the late eighteenth century did the concept of romantic love slowly come to be seen as the basis for marriage. [Romantic love](#) – as distinct from the compulsion of passionate love – involved idealizing its object. The notion of romantic love more or less coincided with the emergence of the novel as a literary form, and the spread of romantic novels played a vital part in advancing the idea (Radway 1984). For women in particular, romantic love meant telling stories about how relationships could lead to personal fulfilment. The centrality of romantic love today cannot be understood as a natural part of life; rather, it is the product of broad social, economic and political change. Ciabattari (2016: 12) notes that, with the shift to an industrial economy, 'The romantic dyad became the core of the family, increasing expectations for intimacy and personal happiness.'

For most people in the developed world, the couple – married or unmarried – is at the core of what family life is. Yet family forms today are very diverse indeed, and same-sex marriage is now legal in more than thirty countries around the world. Some within the LGBTQ+ community view the institution of marriage as tainted by its long history as exclusively heterosexual. Others see the legalization of same-sex marriage as one success in the campaign for equal rights. For instance, the pop star Elton John and his partner David Furnish, though already in a civil partnership, welcomed the opportunity to marry when same-sex marriage was legalized, saying that, 'for this legislation to come through is joyous, and we should celebrate it. We shouldn't just

say, "Oh, well we have a civil partnership. We're not going to bother to get married." We will get married' (cited in BBC News 2014c). The couple also have two children via surrogacy, and their family life illustrates something of the social changes and shifting attitudes that have transformed familial and personal life today.

In this chapter we begin with the familiar idea of 'the family' – a social institution which appears to be timeless and universal. As we shall see, and as feminist sociologists forcefully argued, this notion has often conflated empirical reality with a normative conception of family which allows little room for alternatives. We then outline an approach to family studies which explores the real-world practices – positive and negative – in which people engage and which they acknowledge as being 'familial'. After looking at family diversity today, we then explore theories of the transformation of intimate relations and some of the main changes to marriage, divorce and post-divorce families. The chapter ends with an assessment of the possible convergence of family forms across the world.

The family as institution and ideology

The sociology of the family has long been shaped by contrasting theoretical perspectives. Most of these concentrated on studying the family as a central social institution that performs important functions for individuals, communities, society and the capitalist economic system. These conventional approaches seem much less convincing today in the light of social trends towards heightened individualism and the diversification of family forms. This is reflected in the increasing use of 'families' rather than 'family' in the contemporary literature. It is also evident in the disjunction between official discourses promoting the nuclear family as the norm and people's lived experience of diverse and changing family forms (Chambers 2012: 5–6). It is valuable to trace briefly the development of earlier theories before turning to more recent studies of families and family life.

Functions of the family

The functionalist perspective views society as constituted by a set of social institutions that perform specific functions, ensuring continuity and value consensus. Thus, the family performs important tasks that fulfil some of society's basic needs, helping to reproduce the social order. Sociologists working in the functionalist tradition have seen the nuclear family in particular as fulfilling certain specialized roles in developed Western societies. With the advent of industrialization and the separation of work and home, the family became less important as a unit of economic production and focused more on reproduction, child-rearing and socialization (see 'Classic studies' 15.1).

In Parsons's account, the nuclear family became the dominant type, at least in the developed countries, because it was best adapted to the requirements of a mobile and flexible economic system. This approach highlights a significant problem that has dogged the sociology of the family. While analysing the positive functions of the nuclear family, the latter was also presented as *the best* family form against which all other families could be measured. In this way analytical detachment slipped

into normative endorsement and functionalism tacitly endorsed an [ideological](#) version of 'the family'. This version was not dissimilar to that propounded by some political and religious groups, who argued that the family was under threat from poor parenting, liberal education policies and general moral decline. As divorce rates and single-parent families increased and same-sex relationships became more widely accepted, functionalism seemed ill-equipped to understand the increasing diversity of family life.

[Classic studies 15.1](#) Talcott Parsons on the functions of the family

The research problem

Why is the family such an enduring feature within human societies? Do families do things that other social institutions cannot? Is the family really necessary for a well-ordered society? These questions have been part of ongoing debates within sociology from the discipline's earliest days, but the answers are still the subject of heated debate.

Parsons's explanation

According to the American functionalist sociologist Talcott Parsons, the family's two main functions are *primary socialization* and *personality stabilization* (Parsons and Bales 1956). Primary socialization is the process by which children learn the cultural norms of the society into which they are born. Because this happens during the early years of childhood, the family is the most important arena for the development of the human personality.

Personality stabilization refers to the role that the family plays in assisting adult family members emotionally. Marriage between adult men and women is the arrangement through which adult personalities are supported and kept healthy. In industrial society, the role of the family in stabilizing adult personalities is said to be critical. This is because the nuclear family is often distanced from its extended kin and is unable to draw on larger kinship ties as families could do before industrialization.

Parsons regarded the nuclear family as the unit best equipped to handle the demands of industrial society. In this 'conventional family', one adult can work outside the home, while the second cares for the home and children. In practical terms, the specialization of roles within the nuclear family involved the husband adopting the 'instrumental' role as breadwinner and the wife assuming the 'affective', emotional role in domestic settings.

Critical points

Today Parsons's view of the family comes across as inadequate and outdated. Functionalist theories of the family have come under heavy criticism for justifying the domestic division of labour between men and women as something 'natural' and unproblematic. We can also criticize functionalist arguments for overemphasizing the role of the family and neglecting the role that other social institutions, such as government, media and schools, play in socializing children. And Parsons had little to say about variations in family forms that do not correspond to the model of the nuclear family. Families that did not conform to the white, heterosexual, suburban, middle-class 'ideal' could then be seen as deviant. Finally, the 'dark side' of family life is arguably underplayed in functionalist accounts and therefore not given the significance it deserves.

Contemporary significance

Parsons's functionalist theory of the family is undoubtedly out of favour today, and it is fair to say that it must be seen as a partial account of the role of families within societies. Yet it does have historical significance. The immediate post-war years *did* see many women returning to gendered domestic roles and men reassuming positions as sole breadwinners, which was closer to Parsons's account. Social policy in the UK and the USA has also relied on some variant of the functionalist theory of the family and its role in tackling social problems. We should remember that a central tenet of functionalism is that, as societies change, social institutions must also change if they are to survive. It is possible to see some of the contemporary diversity of family forms as evidence of the adaptation of the family to a rapidly changing social life. If so, then Parsons's functionalist approach may retain some general relevance.

Idealized images of family life are common in the mass media. But are they as widespread online?

From a critical standpoint, Marxist theories of the family also saw the nuclear form as functional, but in ways that enabled capitalists to make profits at the expense of workers. In the late nineteenth century, Engels (2010 [1884]) argued that the spread of private property relations transformed a previously equal domestic division of labour. Managing the household, housework and child-rearing came to be seen as elements of the emerging *private sphere* of life, while men were needed in workplaces outside the home in the *public sphere*. The separation of public and private led to a growing gender inequality that has been

challenged as large numbers of women have moved into paid employment. Even so, this has not resulted in full equality, as women are often still expected to shoulder the double burden of household chores as well as going out to work. The nuclear family enabled the workforce to be reproduced with the costs of doing so falling mainly on women and latterly, the state, rather than eating into capitalist profits. Engels also argues that, under capitalism, monogamous marriage became the ideal way of passing capital and wealth down generations, sustaining the class system.

Functionalist and Marxist theories may seem very different, and, in terms of their evaluation of the nuclear family's role in society, they are. Yet the theories also share a 'family resemblance' (pun intended) in that they both explore the structural position of the family in society and point to the functions that this institution fulfils. This kind of approach is today seen as limited and often misleading. For example, it focuses attention on just one type of family – the nuclear form – and has little to say about alternative types. There is also a tendency for normative or ideological biases to creep in. For instance, there is a simple heteronormativity embedded within these accounts. That is, structural theories assume that the family is an exclusively heterosexual institution, usually rooted in marriage. Functionalist studies tend to portray the nuclear family as ideally suited to modern societies, while Marxists view the bourgeois family as underpinning an exploitative capitalist economic system.

What these theories do not explore are the ways in which family life is actually lived and experienced. As we shall see later, more recent studies of 'family practices' and 'family displays' mark a significant shift in sociological research on families that takes the field in a different direction.

Feminist approaches

Families provide a vital source of solace and comfort, love and companionship. Yet they can also be a locus for exploitation, loneliness and profound inequality. During the 1970s and 1980s, feminist theory had an enormous impact on sociology, challenging the functionalist

view of the family as a harmonious institution. If previously the sociology of the family had focused on family structures, feminism succeeded in directing attention to familial relationships, examining the experiences of women in the domestic sphere.

Feminist research and writing emphasized a broad spectrum of topics, but three main themes are of particular importance. One is the *domestic division of labour*: the way that tasks are allocated among family members. Among feminists there are differing opinions about the historical emergence of this division. Socialist feminists see it as the outcome of industrial capitalism, while others claim that it is linked to patriarchy and thus predates industrialization. As Engels argued, a domestic division of labour did exist before industrialization, but capitalist social relations brought about a much sharper distinction between (private) domesticity and (public) work. This resulted in the crystallization of 'male and female spheres' and the model or ideal of the male breadwinner, though this has been eroded somewhat over recent decades.

Sociologists have examined the contribution that women's unpaid domestic labour makes to the overall economy (Oakley 1974b; Damaske 2011) and the way resources are distributed among family members, particularly the unequal patterns of access to and control over household finances (Pahl 1989). A larger number of studies have focused on domestic labour, looking for signs that, as more women enter formal, paid employment, often full-time, this may alter the traditional gendered division of household labour.

Early studies in the 1970s theorized that, as mixed-sex relationships became more 'symmetrical', the distribution of responsibilities, such as housework and childcare, would be shared more equally (Young and Willmott 1973). However, feminist and sociological research has shown that women continue to perform, on average, 70 per cent of housework (Kan and Laurie 2018: 17). Kan and Laurie also found that there are differences across ethnic groups in the UK, with Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women spending more time on housework than white British women and mixed background women. The latter do the least housework of any ethnic groups, though at 65 per cent this still represents a large gender gap.

Women also bear the main responsibility for domestic tasks and enjoy less leisure time than men, *despite* the fact that more women are in paid employment than ever before (de Vaus 2008: 394–6; Kan et al. 2011). One more recent small-scale study, by Windebank and Martinez-Perez (2018), looked at how dual-earner, mixed-sex couples with heavy workloads organized their domestic roles. Some couples with young children sought a less conventional division of domestic labour that allowed both to work full-time. The study found that, rather than sharing domestic tasks more equally, men took on some smaller, time-limited tasks, but the more time-consuming and traditionally 'female' ones were outsourced to paid-for domestic service providers, most of whom are women.

Feminists draw attention to the *unequal power relationships* that exist within family relations. One topic that has received increased attention as a result of this is the phenomenon of domestic violence. Marital rape, incest, violent assault, mental and emotional abuse, and the sexual abuse of children have all received more public attention following feminists' assertion that this 'dark side' of family life has long been invisible or simply ignored. Feminist sociologists sought to understand how the family serves as an arena for the reproduction of male dominance through the oppression of women.

The study of *caring activities* is a third field to which feminists have made important contributions. This is a broad area that encompasses a variety of processes, from attending to a family member who is ill to looking after an elderly relative over a long period of time. Sometimes caring means simply being attuned to someone else's psychological well-being, and some feminist writers have been interested in 'emotion work' within relationships. Not only do women tend to shoulder concrete tasks such as cleaning and childcare, but they also invest large amounts of emotional labour in maintaining familial personal relationships (Wharton 2012: 164–5). While caring activities are grounded in love and deep emotion, they are also a form of work which demands an ability to listen, perceive, negotiate and act creatively.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that 'the family' in sociology is not what it was before feminism. Feminist research and theorizing helped to produce a much more realistic and balanced appreciation of

the institution of the family and of family life as it is lived. And, as is the case with much good sociology, the reality of family life turns out to be far removed from political and normative ideals.

The family in decline, or the way we never were?

Some commentators lament what they see as the demise of traditional family values, duties and obligations. They argue that we must recover a moral sense of family life and reinstate 'the traditional family', which was more stable and ordered than the tangled web of relationships in which we now find ourselves (R. O'Neill 2002). Proponents of 'the traditional family' are unhappy with the increasing diversity of families and intimate relationships, which they see as undermining marriage and traditional family life. This argument draws on the idea that in some earlier period there really was a 'golden age' of family life. But when was this?

For some, the discipline and stability of nineteenth-century Victorian family life is held to be the ideal. Yet families at this time also suffered high death rates, the average length of marriages was less than twelve years, and more than half of all children saw the death of at least one parent by the time they were twenty-one. The discipline of the Victorian family was also rooted in the strict authority of parents over their children. Some middle-class wives were more or less confined to the home, as Victorian morality demanded that women should be strictly virtuous, but it was accepted that men would visit prostitutes and brothels. In fact, wives and husbands often had little to do with each other, communicating only through the children. Domesticity was not even an option for poorer social groups. In factories and workshops, working-class families worked very long hours with little time for a cosy home life, while child labour was commonplace. Coontz (1992) pointed out that, as with all visions of a previous golden age, the rosy light shed on the 'traditional family' dissolves when we look at the historical evidence.

Another suggestion is that the 1950s was the time of an ideal family life. This was a period when many women stayed at home to bring up

children and maintain the home while men were the 'breadwinners' responsible for earning a 'family wage'. Women held paid jobs in large numbers during the Second World War as part of the war effort, which they then lost when men returned home. Yet large numbers of women did not want to retreat to a purely domestic role and felt miserable and trapped within it. Husbands were still emotionally distant from their wives and often observed a strong sexual double standard, seeking sexual adventure for themselves but expecting a strict monogamous code for their spouse.

The best-selling book by the American author Betty Friedan (1921–2006), *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), discussed women's lives in the 1950s and struck a chord with women. She described the 'problem with no name' – that is, the oppressive nature of domestic life bound up with childcare, domestic drudgery and a husband who only occasionally put in an appearance and with whom little emotional communication was possible. Even more severe than an oppressive home life were the alcoholism and violence suffered within many families during a period when domestic and intimate violence were seen as private matters. Again, the idea of a 1950s 'ideal family' appears to be another nostalgic myth.

As sociologists, we cannot adjudicate between firmly held moral positions, but we can evaluate the proposals put forward. Returning to an older, traditional family is not realistic – not just because the traditional family was a mythical entity anyway or because people today consider it oppressive. It is not possible because the broad social changes that have transformed marriage, families and sexual partnerships are not easily reversible. Women will not return in large numbers to a domestic situation from which they have striven to extricate themselves. Sexual partnerships, emotional communication and marriage cannot return to the way they used to be. On the other hand, there is little doubt that trends affecting sexuality, marriage and the family do create deep anxieties for some at the same time as they generate new possibilities for satisfaction and self-fulfilment for others.

We must be careful not to let ideas of how society *ought* to be influence our understanding of society based on the evidence. As the older sociology of the family came to be seen as conflating what is with what

ought to be, it became clear that alternative approaches were required. One of the more influential of these is rooted in the deceptively simple idea that, rather than studying the family as a social institution, sociologists should explore what people actually do that they recognize as being 'family-like'. This perspective is outlined next.

Family practices

Political debates on family policy are bound up with ideas of an ideal family form that should be promoted by governments. Today, there is no single model of family life that is or could be more or less universal. Instead the evidence is clear that there are many different family forms. Gillis (1996) distinguished the 'families we live by' – the ideal family presented in social policy and mass media – from the 'families we live with' – the daily family lives we actually create and experience.

As we will see later, the diversification of family is linked to wider social processes, including an increasing proportion of women in paid employment, more sexual freedom, and the movement towards gender and sexual equality. So, although we may discuss 'the family' as a key social institution, it is vital to remember the variety of forms this generalization covers. For some, understanding 'family' as it is actually lived demands a new approach which builds from empirical research rather than the family's institutional role.

'Doing' family life

An alternative way of discussing family life is suggested by David Morgan, who argues that it is more productive to talk of family practices – that is, all of those activities engaged in by people which *they* perceive to be part of 'family life' (see 'Classic studies' 15.2 below). Chambers et al. (2009) argue that there are several advantages in adopting this perspective. First, it helps researchers to explore the increasingly fluid character of family lives and networks, such as the criss-crossing of biological and step-families. Second, it focuses attention on the relatively neglected ways in which people 'do families' – or how they actually construct and live their familial relations. Third, it rebalances existing sociological work on the family as a social institution by looking at the agency of the individuals involved, who actively create their family roles and routines, thereby helping to explain changing family forms.

[Classic studies 15.2](#) From social institution to family practices

The research problem

For much of the twentieth century, sociologists of the family saw the nuclear family as the standard against which other family types were assessed. Chambers (2012: 41) argues that, from the 1990s, it became increasingly clear that it was more accurate to talk of *families* rather than *the family*, and the conventional approach lost ground. But what could replace it? David Morgan (1996, 1999, 2011) laid out an alternative approach which has been highly influential in shaping the field of family studies.

Morgan's explanation

For many twentieth-century sociologists, families involved marriage and biologically related, emotionally close kinship groups. Seen in this way, it was relatively easy to differentiate family from non-family relationships. But numerous changes, including fewer marriages, higher divorce rates, more step- or blended families, same-sex couples and families, single-parent families and new reproductive technologies, highlighted the diversity rather than uniformity of family types. As Morgan (2011: 3) bluntly put it, 'there is no such thing as "The Family".'

Morgan's central innovation was to set out an alternative, empirically adequate family sociology based on the actions or practices of families, and his research agenda focused on how people 'do family'. That is, which of the many actions and activities in which people engage are seen by them as 'familial' and why? This theoretical shift means that, '"Family" represents a constructed quality of human interaction or an active process rather than a thing-like object of detached social investigation' (Morgan 1999: 16).

For example, Morgan (2011) asks what it means to say that people 'are related'. The answer may once have been obvious, but today it is

not. A married heterosexual couple with children may divorce and both parents take new partners, for whom the children become 'step-children'. But, if the new couples then separate, does this effectively end the new partners' relationship with their step-children? A family practices approach treats this as an empirical question, as the answer depends on the choices and decisions made by the actors involved. Who counts as kin or family is likely to change over time, thus illustrating Morgan's point that 'family' is not an entity but is always in process.

If kin relations change over time, then so too do the activities defined as familial. Taking children to school, attending family events such as celebrations, weddings and funerals, providing informal unpaid childcare, doing household chores, keeping in touch by daily phone calls, and lots more may all be perceived as 'family-like' activities. Yet these may involve people who are not biologically related, such as friends and neighbours, who themselves may be considered to be 'part of the family' and treated as such. Very often, family nomenclature such as 'uncle' or 'auntie' are applied to close friends who perform family-like activities as a recognition of their awarded status as a privileged family member. Morgan argues that none of this should lead to sociologists dispensing with the concept of family altogether. However complex understanding this concept has now become, he argues that 'family' continues to be meaningful for most people. May (2015: 482) suggests that 'Family practices also retain some distinctiveness that would be lost if we subsumed these under some broader term such as intimacy practices.'

Critical points

The family practices approach has been particularly influential in empirical British sociology, but less so elsewhere. For example, Heath et al. (2011) argue that, despite dealing with similar concerns, the language and concept of family practices have not been widely adopted in the more anthropologically oriented transnational studies of families that span national boundaries. One reason for this is the different ways in which these approaches view ideologies of 'the family'. In the study of migration to the European

Union, families remain constrained by legal definitions which tend to be of the nuclear family. Kofman (2004: 245) notes that 'migrants cannot determine for themselves the persons who constitute their family.' This is a reminder that official ideas of the family as a key social institution retain their power to affect family life.

A second substantive criticism is that the attempt to avoid becoming bogged down in normative and political arguments about which family form best fits a particular society has not been wholly avoided. Family practices are not distinct from political discourses and moral ideals. Heaphy (2011) argues that alternative family practices and family displays (see below), such as those of single parents and gay couples, struggle to gain legitimacy from wider audiences, which are often unwilling to accept them as viable alternatives to the idealized 'normal' middle-class nuclear family form. Again, the criticism is that a focus on family practices, however insightful, should not obscure the continuing power of the conventional idea of 'the family', which remains dominant in policy circles and among large sections of society.

Contemporary significance

Morgan's family practices approach set out the theoretical basis for British family studies to move in a new direction – one that encourages detailed empirical research studies. This was a welcome move which reinvigorated the field of family studies, lifting it out of a theoretical malaise. Over time the perspective has also been expanded and developed to take in new areas such as family displays – the ways in which people show that they are doing appropriate 'family things' to relevant audiences. It has also connected the study of family life to other fields associated with understanding the everyday and personal, and, in doing so, it promises to bridge the divide between family and non-family relations. The next stage for Morgan's approach will be to test its applicability beyond the British case and into different national and, indeed, transnational family practices.

Family practices cover many activities – eating together, holding 'family' events, organizing children's attendance in school, and much more. But

studying these kinds of practices may not tell us the whole story of families. Following Finch's (2007) work, more recent studies in this area have also looked at family displays – all of those ways in which people demonstrate to others that they are engaged in (appropriate) family practices and family relationships. Finch argues that people do not 'do family' in isolation from the rest of social life. As Dermott and Seymour (2011: 13) note, 'it is insufficient for practices associated with family life to be merely carried out; they must also be recognised *as* family practices by others.' These 'others' may be social workers and state officials, but more often family displays are aimed at family members, other families, friends and onlookers. It is also likely that, as with other social interactions, displays involve multiple audiences.

A good example of this is Harman and Cappellini's (2015) qualitative research into the practice and display of middle-class mothers making their children's school lunchboxes. Preparing a packed lunch is a routine family practice for their small sample of mothers, but such a simple object carries numerous meanings and messages. For example, in the wake of a highly charged public debate about what constitutes a healthy diet for children, mothers had to take account of the child's requests but also of television programmes and media commentary, political debate, school rules and supermarket advertising. The authors argue that mothers used lunchboxes to display their competence as mothers not only to other children, school staff and canteen supervisors but also to themselves. However, the key audience seemed to be the school staff, and most of the mothers adhered to school guidance in their preparations.

The school lunchbox is a simple example of 'family' being presented to several audiences.

This small-scale study of just eleven mothers from a highly specific class grouping is not generalizable to the wider population, but we can see in it some links to the wider society. It is clear that gendered assumptions were operative, as preparing the lunchbox was clearly perceived as the mother's responsibility, not the father's, even though all the mothers had paid employment too. Although the mothers described their lunchbox choices as individually tailored to their child, the study found that they were essentially similar. This suggests the continuing influence of widespread cultural norms governing what constitutes the basic structure of a 'balanced' and 'healthy' meal. As members of white, middle-class families, these mothers felt anxious about being on display in the public setting of the school, which potentially opened them up to monitoring and criticism.

The family practices approach has proved to be an effective one which continues to develop. Yet there are good reasons to think that we should not be too eager to dispense with older structural perspectives altogether. As Edwards and her colleagues (2012) argue, much valuable statistical research remains committed to some concept of families as households, while tracking shifts in family life over time also requires an awareness of family structure(s) and the way these change. It is difficult to see how significant macrosociological questions – such as whether family structures are converging globally or whether economic systems lead to specific family forms – could be addressed unless some notion of 'family' as a social institution (as well as a set of practices) is retained.

In the next two sections we draw on research into family practices and statistical survey evidence on housework and gender inequality and

intimate violence to illustrate the more comprehensive picture that emerges from combining micro and macro approaches.

Work, housework and gender inequality

Family practices are not simply those that people enjoy or choose to engage in. As Morgan (1996) made clear, there are numerous family practices which people feel under pressure to perform or which have negative consequences for them. Gendered expectations put pressure on men to work full-time and women to prioritize domestic responsibilities, while the abuse of children, older people and women within family settings is much more common than was once thought. These aspects must be considered family practices too, as they are actions which involve people perceived to be family members and take place in family settings.

Gender inequality varies across the world's societies. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranks countries on gender inequality based on combining three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment, and labour market participation. On this combined measure, no country in the world had achieved gender parity in 2017. Unsurprisingly perhaps, countries that do best on moving towards gender equality are also those with the highest overall 'human development' score, including Switzerland, Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, Norway and Slovenia. Among those with the largest gender inequality gap are Yemen, Chad, Mali, Central African Republic, Côte d'Ivoire and Liberia (UNDP 2019a). Even in the high-income countries, a persistent gender pay gap remains, though this is reducing gradually. For example, the average gender pay gap (the difference between average gross hourly pay for men and women) across the countries of the European Union in 2017 was 16 per cent, a small reduction from 17.5 per cent in 2010. Within this broad average there is much national variation, from just 3 per cent in Romania and 5 per cent in Italy and Luxembourg to 25.6 per cent in Estonia and 21 per cent in Czechia (Eurostat 2019b).

See chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', for much more on gender inequality.

Societal perceptions that, for women, work is secondary to having children and that looking after them is a natural and biologically determined role are among the major factors affecting women's careers. Such traditional beliefs directly impact on the work–care balance for men and women despite formal equal opportunities legislation (Crompton 2008). Many women find themselves struggling with two contradictory forces. They want and need economic independence, but at the same time they want to be 'good' mothers to their children. A major question is how the caring 'work', previously carried out by women in the domestic sphere without payment, will be performed now that more women have moved into paid employment. Crompton (2006: 17) suggests that this can be achieved only if the previous gendered division of labour is 'deconstructed' and men become rather more like women, combining employment and care-giving in their everyday lives. An increasing flexibility in employment and working life may be one part of the solution, but much more difficult is likely to be shifting the traditional attitudes of men.

Housework

Although there have been major changes in women's status in recent decades, including the entry of women into male-dominated professions, one area of work has lagged far behind: housework. As more married women entered the workforce, some presumed that men would begin to make a larger contribution to housework. On the whole, this has not been the case. Although men do more housework than in the 1970s and 1980s and women do slightly less, the balance is highly unequal and varies widely across societies. The largest housework gaps in the EU are in Greece, Italy and Bulgaria, while the smallest are in Sweden, Latvia and Denmark (Eurostat 2018c: 24–6).
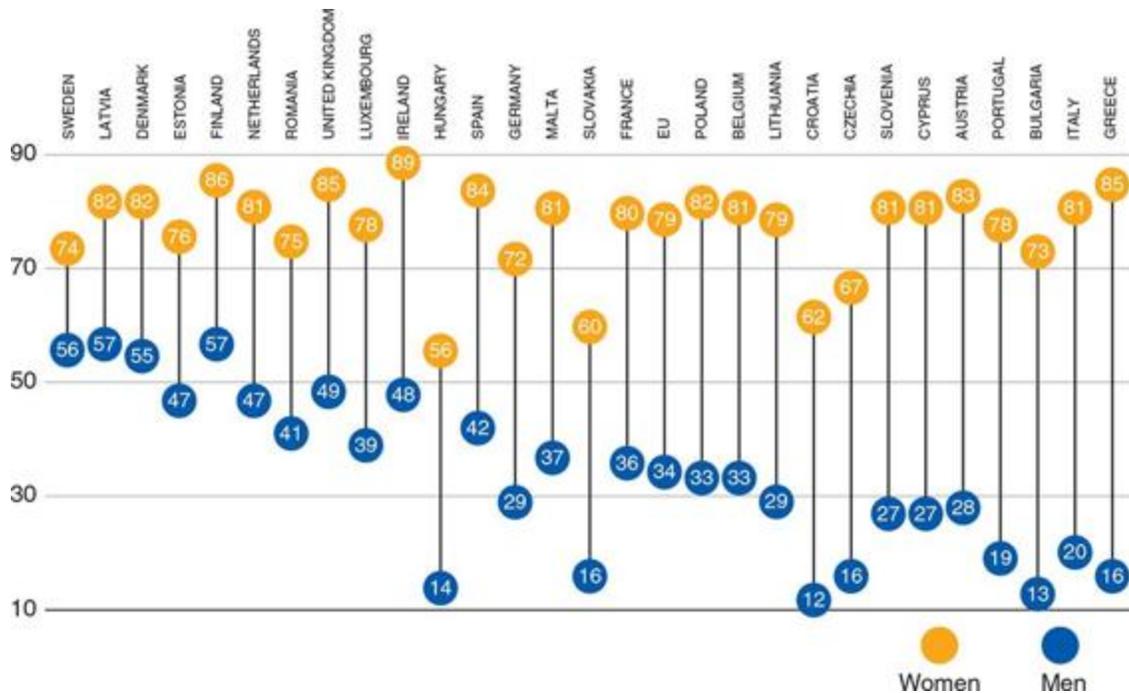
Figure 15.1 Daily cooking and housework by men and women, EU28, 2016 (percentages)

Note: Percentage of adults aged eighteen and over cooking and/or doing housework every day.

Source: Eurostat (2018c: 25).

Several surveys have also found that women still do most of the housework and childcare in the UK. In the 2013 British Social Attitudes Survey, women reported spending an average of thirteen hours per week on housework and twenty-three hours caring for family members. Men reported spending, on average, eight hours on housework and ten hours on caring activities (Park et al. 2013: 115). Some sociologists have argued that, where women are already working in the paid sector, this additional housework amounts to a 'second shift' (Shelton 1992). But why does housework remain largely 'women's work'? This question has been the focus of a good deal of research over recent years.

One possible explanation is that it is the result of gendered economic forces: female household work is exchanged for male economic support. Because women earn, on average, less than men, they tend to remain economically dependent on their husbands and thus perform the bulk of the housework. Hence, until the earnings gap is narrowed,

women are likely to remain in a dependent position. Hochschild (1989) argued that women are doubly oppressed by men: once during the 'first shift' and then again during the 'second shift'. But, while it contributes to our understanding of the gendered aspects of housework, this exchange model breaks down in situations where the wife earns more than the husband.

Miller (2011) argues that, when opposite-sex couples have children, the tendency is that they 'fall back into gender'. That is, although men may use the language of a 'new fatherhood', which emphasizes fathers' increased involvement and bonding with children, their practices continue to reflect the older discourse of the family breadwinner. In Hochschild's study, even husbands who earned less than their wives did not do an equal share of housework. Mothers are also more likely to take a career break after the birth of a child than fathers and to move onto part-time hours on their return, with negative impacts on their lifetime earnings and retirement pension (Clisby and Holdsworth 2016: 149–57). Women are expected to enjoy the motherhood role and to prioritize this over their role as a worker, while, for men, fatherhood is still seen as their part-time role, secondary to their primary one of worker. Not only does this create problems for women wanting to pursue their career, it also means that men find it difficult to justify becoming the main care-giver without being criticized.

Sociologists have long seen the inequitable distribution of household tasks as rooted in the assumption that men and women operate in different spheres of life, which then leads to gendered expectations of their roles. Men are expected to be providers while women are expected to tend to the family – even if they are 'breadwinners' as well as mothers. The persistence of such gendered assumptions demonstrates just how deeply embedded and consistently reproduced they are, even in the face of quite radical shifts in educational opportunity, employment and personal relationships.

Domestic and family violence

Since family and kin relations are part of everyone's existence, family life encompasses virtually the whole range of emotional experiences. Family relationships can be warm and fulfilling, but they can also contain the most pronounced tensions, driving people to despair or filling them with anxiety and guilt. This 'dark side' of families involves domestic violence, elder abuse and the abuse of children, belying the rosy images of harmony emphasized in TV adverts and the popular media.

The sexual abuse of children

The UK's National Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) defines four categories of child abuse: neglect, physical abuse, emotional abuse and sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is defined as 'sexual contact between a child and adult for the purpose of the adult's sexual gratification' (Lyon and de Cruz 1993). The full extent of child sexual abuse is very difficult to calculate accurately because of the many forms it can assume, as well as on account of national differences in defining and recording practices. The European Commission estimates that between 10 and 20 per cent of children in Europe experience sexual assault during childhood, and this proportion has been quite consistent over the last few decades. In addition, online child pornography is a growing problem, not just in Europe, but globally (European Commission 2019).

Incest refers to sexual relations between close kin, but not all incest is child sexual abuse. For example, sexual intercourse between brother

and sister is incestuous but does not fit the definition of abuse. In child sexual abuse, an adult is essentially exploiting an infant or child for sexual purposes. Nevertheless, the most common form of incest is one that *is* also child sexual abuse – incestuous relations between fathers and young daughters.

Incest, and child sexual abuse more generally, is a phenomenon that has been 'discovered' only in the past few decades. Of course it has long been known that such sexual acts occur, but it was assumed by most that the strong social taboos against this behaviour meant that it must be very rare. This assumption has been shown to be false. Child sexual abuse has proved to be much more widespread than was thought. Research by the World Health Organization (WHO 2006a) into factors associated with a higher risk of child maltreatment include poverty and high levels of unemployment, though we need to be cautious about drawing such conclusions. It may be that, with a range of charities and welfare services targeting poverty alleviation, more abuse among poorer families is reported as a result. Rather than there being a clear causal relationship between social class and domestic violence, differential levels of surveillance and reporting may better account for this finding (Hearn and McKie 2008).

Child sexual abuse exists at all levels of the social hierarchy as well as in institutional settings such as residential care, educational establishments and churches. The relatively recent discovery of the extent of child abuse carried out by priests, nuns and monks in the Roman Catholic Church, along with attempts to cover this up, shows that no social institution is immune to the abuse of power by adults over the children in their care (Jenkins 2001).

Force or the threat of violence is involved in many cases of incest. Children are sexual beings and quite often engage in mild sexual play or exploration with one another. But children subjected to sexual contact with adult family members report finding the experience repugnant, shameful and distressing. Some studies point to correlations between child physical or sexual abuse and drug addiction, non-suicidal self-injury and other harmful behaviours. However, again, we must remember that correlation is not causation. Demonstrating that people in these categories have been sexually abused as children does not

show that the abuse was a causal influence over their later behaviour. More research is needed to establish what consequences follow from childhood maltreatment.

Domestic violence

We may define domestic violence as physical or sexual abuse directed by one member of the family against another or several others. This definition may be seen as too restrictive as it leaves out the emotional, psychological, economic and social aspects associated with domestic abuse. But definitions matter, as they determine what 'counts' as domestic and family violence and therefore help to shape our understanding of the extent of the problem and what should be done about it (Meyer and Frost 2019: 5).

Women's refuges provide safe havens for women and children from domestic abuse and violent partners but suffered almost £7 million of funding cuts between 2010 and 2018 (Grierson 2018).

The main targets of physical abuse in the family are children, but violence by men against their female partners is the second most common type of domestic violence. The UK Office for National Statistics estimated that, in 2017–18, some two million adults (aged sixteen to fifty-nine) experienced domestic abuse. The latter takes in physical, psychological, sexual, financial and emotional abuse, including patterns of controlling and coercive behaviour (ONS 2018d: 4). Self-reported data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales shows that women were almost twice as likely to experience domestic abuse as men – 1.3 million women and 695,000 men (ibid.: 8). Women were four times more likely than men to have experienced sexual assault by their partner in the previous year and nine times more likely since the age of 16.

Global society 15.1 The extent of domestic violence – a global view

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that, globally, 30 per cent of women have experienced physical or sexual violence at the hands of an intimate partner. An upper estimate is that around 38 per cent of all murders of women are committed by male intimate partners (WHO 2017b). A recent United Nations summary of what is known about the global situation on domestic violence against women reported the following (UN Women 2019):

some national studies show that up to 70 per cent of women have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime. Evidence shows that women who have experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence report higher rates of depression, having an abortion and acquiring HIV, compared to women who have not.

Similar to data from other regions, in all four countries of a multi-country study from the Middle East and North Africa, men who witnessed their fathers using violence against their mothers, and men who experienced some form of violence at home as children, were significantly more likely to report perpetrating intimate partner violence in their adult relationships. For example, in Lebanon the likelihood of perpetrating physical violence was more than three times higher among men who had witnessed their fathers beating their mothers during childhood than those who did not.

It is estimated that, of the 87,000 women who were intentionally killed in 2017 globally, more than half (50,000 – 58 per cent) were killed by intimate partners or family members, meaning that 137 women across the world are killed by a member of their own family every day. More than a third (30,000) of the women intentionally killed in 2017 were killed by their current or former intimate partner.

THINKING CRITICALLY

The statistics show that violence within families and households is mainly by men, especially partners, against women and children. If we reject simple biological explanations of aggressive males and passive females, what social, economic or cultural factors may help us to explain this widespread pattern?

The issue of domestic violence attracted public and academic attention during the 1970s as a result of the work undertaken by feminist groups with refuge centres. Before that time, domestic violence, like child abuse, was a phenomenon that was tactfully ignored as a private matter. Feminist studies of patriarchy and domestic violence drew attention to the ways in which this privatization of violence and abuse worked to uphold the dominance of men in patriarchal societies. It was feminist studies which documented the prevalence and severity of violence against women in the home. Indeed, most violent episodes between spouses reported to the police involve violence by husbands against their wives. There are far fewer reported cases of women using physical force against their husbands. Feminists argue that domestic violence is a major form of male control over women.

For theories and evidence of patriarchy, see [chapter 7](), 'Gender and Sexuality'.

However, in the 1980s some conservative commentators claimed that violence in the family is related to male power, as feminists contend, but has more to do with 'dysfunctional families'. Violence against women, they suggested, reflects the growing crisis of family life and the erosion of moral standards. They also argued that men are less likely to report instances of domestic violence against them, which calls the official statistics into question (Straus and Gelles 1986). This argument was

strongly criticized by feminists and social scientists. Violence by women, they say, is more restrained and episodic than that of men and much less likely to cause enduring physical harm, and men are far less likely to be repeat victims than women. The violence used by men against their female partners is greater in its intensity and more severe in its consequences. Domestic violence against women by their male partners is also more likely to involve emotional and mental abuse (Hester 2013).

Why is domestic violence so common? One factor is the combination of emotional intensity and personal intimacy that is characteristic of family life. Family ties are charged with strong emotions, often mixing love and hate, and quarrels which break out in domestic settings can unleash antagonisms that are not so potent in other social contexts. Minor incidents can precipitate full-scale hostilities between partners or between parents and children. The 'stay-at-home' restrictions imposed by many governments to tackle the viral spread during the 2019–20 Covid-19 pandemic led to a surge in reports of domestic violence. For example, in one county within China's Hubei province, reports of domestic violence to police tripled in February 2020, while Refuge, the UK's largest domestic abuse charity, recorded a 700 per cent increase in calls to its helpline in just one day in April 2020 (Townsend 2020).

A second factor is that a certain level of violence within the family is often tolerated or even approved of. For example, many children in Britain have at some time been slapped or hit, if only in a minor way, by one of their parents. Such actions quite often meet with general approval on the part of others and may not even be thought of as 'violence'. Following the Scottish government's 2019 legislation which makes the smacking of children by their parents illegal, there is increasing pressure from campaigning groups for the rest of the UK to join other European countries that have already outlawed the physical punishment of children.

We should not overstate the dark side of family life because most people's experience of families is, on the whole, positive. Indeed, when asked what is the most important part of their lives, many people say that family is what matters most. Nevertheless, sociological studies of

inequalities and violence within families have led to a more rounded and sober appreciation of the reality of these family practices.

Family diversity and intimate relations

In the 1980s, Rapoport et al. (1982: 476) argued that 'families in Britain today are in transition from coping in a society in which there was a single overriding norm of what a family should be like to a society in which a plurality of norms are recognised as legitimate and, indeed, desirable.' Substantiating this argument, they identified five types of diversity: *organizational, cultural, class, life course* and *cohort*. We can now add *sexual diversity* to this list.

Socialization and life stages are also discussed in chapter 14, 'The Life Course'.

Diverse family structures

Families *organize* their domestic duties and links with the wider social environment in a variety of ways. The contrast between 'orthodox' families – with the woman as 'housewife' and husband as 'breadwinner' – and dual-career (both working) or one-parent families illustrates this point. *Culturally*, there is also greater diversity of family arrangements and values today than in the first half of the twentieth century. Persistent *class* divisions between the poor, the skilled working classes and the various groupings within the middle and upper classes also sustain major variations in family structure. Variations in the individual experience of 'family' across the *life course* are fairly obvious. For instance, one individual might be born into a family in which both parents had stayed together and go on to marry and then divorce. Another person might be brought up in a single-parent family, be married several times and have children from each marriage.

The term *cohort* refers to generations within families, and, as more people live into very old age, it is becoming more common to find three 'ongoing' families existing in close relation to one another: married grandchildren, their parents and grandparents. There is also greater *sexual* diversity in family organizations than ever before. As diverse sexualities become increasingly accepted in most Western societies, families are formed based on same-sex partnerships as well as opposite-sex couples. The presence of minority ethnic groups, such as families of South Asian or West Indian origin, have also contributed to the considerable variety in family forms, and we look at two instances of this cultural diversity next.

Gay marriage and civil partnerships are discussed in [chapter 7](), 'Gender and Sexuality'.

South Asian families

The category of 'South Asian families' covers Indians, Bangladeshis, Pakistanis and African Asians (people of South Asian origin who had lived in Africa before migrating to the UK) (Smith and Prior 1997). There are clearly many differences between these varied groups in relation to family structures and patterns of living, though there are also some distinctive similarities, especially when compared with the conventional nuclear family type. Migration began in the 1950s from three main areas of the Indian subcontinent: Punjab, Gujarat and Bengal. In Britain, these migrant groups formed communities based on religion, area of origin, caste and, most importantly, kinship. Many migrants found their ideas of honour and family loyalty largely absent among the white British population.

South Asian children born in Europe today are often exposed to two different cultures. At home, parents may continue to expect conformity to the norms of cooperation, respect and family loyalty, while, at school,

academic success is rooted in a competitive and individualistic social environment. Many choose to organize their domestic and personal lives in terms of their ethnic culture, as they value the close relationships associated with traditional family life. Yet involvement with Western culture has brought changes.

The Western tradition of marrying 'for love' seems to be growing among young people, though this can be a source of tension with the traditional practice of arranged marriages within Asian communities. Such unions, arranged by parents and family members, are predicated on the belief that love comes from within marriage, and first-generation migrants from South Asia 'often retain strong support for their heritage culture where marriage is seen as the only acceptable setting for intimate relations' (Berrington 2020: 914).

This continues into the second generation, with far fewer young South Asians expecting to cohabit than other ethnic groups. Berrington (2020: 924–6) reports that almost three-quarters of Pakistani and Bangladeshi and half of Indian young women (aged sixteen to twenty-one) said the possibility of their cohabiting in the future was 'zero'. Only 4 per cent of white British young women had a zerolevel expectation. However, South Asian young women had, on average, a higher expected age of marriage than their parents' generation, at twenty-five for young men and twenty-four for young women. Similarly, this 2018 survey found that young South Asian women expected to become mothers at, on average, the age of twenty-seven, which is older than the actual age of motherhood for South Asian women born between 1960 and 1979. Such findings suggest that young people's expectations of marriage and parenthood are more closely linked to their educational aspirations, particularly as higher education has become more accessible.

On the other hand, police forces in the UK report that they deal with 'forced marriages' in which young women are sent abroad to marry without their consent, though around 7 per cent of forced marriages took place within the UK in 2018. The UK Forced Marriage Unit (FMU) estimates that there are between 1,200 and 1,400 cases of forced marriage per year, 75 per cent of these involving women and girls. The majority of cases (67 per cent) have involved just six countries – Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Somalia, Afghanistan and Romania – but

since 2011 the unit has dealt with forced marriages in 110 countries (Home Office 2019a: 2–3). The FMU reports that the problem is particularly acute in more remote, rural areas of Pakistan, Bangladesh and elsewhere, and its role is to provide a supportive network for those who seek help. Forced marriage can be seen as one aspect of the 'darker side' of families.

In the UK Policy Study Institute's fourth national survey of ethnic minorities in 1997, Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis and African Asians were the ethnic groups most likely to be married (Modood et al. 1997; Berthoud 2000). Evidence from the 2011 Census for England and Wales shows there has been little change in this pattern. In this survey, 47 per cent of Asian households were married couples or civil partners, the highest proportion of any ethnic group. Only 32.9 per cent of white households and 21.6 per cent of black households were made up of married couples or civil partners (ONS 2019b; see table 15.1). In 2009, 894,000 dependent children in Asian or Asian British families (some 86 per cent) lived in married couple families – relatively high compared with 62 per cent of dependent children (6.7 million) from white ethnic backgrounds and 39 per cent (196,000) from black or black British backgrounds (ONS 2010a).

In summary, there are some signs of change among second-generation South Asians living in the UK. These include young people wanting a greater say in when and who they marry and the age at which they expect to become parents. There has also been a small rise in divorce and in single-parent households. It seems that young South Asians in the UK, and across Europe more generally, continue to find ways of living across both their collectivistic heritage culture and the highly individualized value system that exists in the majority white British culture.

Table 15.1 Household types by ethnic group, England and Wales, 2011 Census (percentages)

Source: ONS (2019b).

	Cohabiting couple	Lone parent	Married or same-sex civil partnership couple	One-person household	Other household types	Pensioner couple
Ethnicity						
Asian	3.5	8.8	47.0	17.0	21.7	2.1
Black	6.8	24.3	21.6	31.7	14.1	1.5
Mixed	11.2	19.1	19.9	35.2	12.9	1.7
White	10.3	10.2	32.9	30.9	6.8	8.9
Other	5.2	10.5	37.0	30.7	15.0	1.4

African-Caribbean families

African Caribbeans made up 1.1 per cent of the population of England and Wales in 2011, which is 594,825 people, and families of African-Caribbean descent in Europe have some different aspects (Douglas 2019: 92). In the UK there are far fewer African-Caribbean women aged between twenty and forty-four than white or South Asian women in the same age group living with a husband. Rates of divorce and separation are higher among African Caribbeans than among other ethnic groups in Britain and, as a result, single-parent households are more commonly found. For instance, in the 2011 national Census, 38.1 per cent of black Caribbean households were made up of one person, compared with 25.4 per cent of black African and 17 per cent of Asian households (ONS 2019b). Yet Barn et al. (2006) reported that 72 per cent of black Caribbean women were in employment and a higher proportion of black Caribbean lone parents were employed compared with other ethnic groups. The higher proportion of single-parent families among the black British African-Caribbean population, a majority of which are headed by mothers, compared with other ethnic groups, can be seen in table 15.1.

Across the UK, the same factors seem to be at work among African-Caribbean families that exist in the poorer neighbourhoods of London and other European cities. Many discussions concentrate on low rates of formal marriage, lone parenthood and a parenting style that involves strict discipline, but some believe that these aspects are often

misunderstood. Williams et al. (2012) argue that, although many fathers may not live in the family home, they continue to be active parents and provide resources and social capital for their children. The marriage relationship does not necessarily form the structure of British African-Caribbean families in the same way that it does for families in other ethnic groups.

Extended kinship networks are important in West Indian groups and tend to be much more significant, relative to marital ties, than in most white European communities. Therefore, a mother heading a single-parent family is likely to have a wider supportive network of relatives and friends to depend on (Berthoud 2000). Many black Caribbean families in the UK live in areas of high socio-economic deprivation and rely on grandparents and the wider kin network for support. Such strong support networks provide the necessary foundation for the higher involvement of African-Caribbean women in paid employment than other ethnic groups.

Douglas (2019: 94) also noted that discipline is certainly important in black Caribbean families, but this is thought to be a way of ensuring that children have the best chance of achieving social mobility. It is also a way in which parents convey the message to the wider community that their children are respectful. A generational change seems to be under way, as younger parents move towards persuasion and cooperation and away from physical measures, preferring to teach children about their cultural heritage through food and other signifiers.

Our necessarily brief synopsis above illustrates something of the major shift that has taken place in the sociology of family life. As societies become more culturally diverse, understanding families inevitably becomes more complex, and sociologists have to get to grips with the new situation. And though we do now have to speak of 'families' rather than 'the family', the persistence of expectations of marriage among young people across all ethnic groups shows that some traditional elements still exert a strong influence in the midst of contemporary social change.

Theories of love, intimacy and personal life

As we observed in the chapter introduction, industrial capitalism, and the modernity it brought, transformed family life. Attitudes towards sex and marriage, childcare, domestic tasks and emotional communication between couples have all undergone major change. Stone (1980) charted some of these key developments in England through a three-phase model of family, from the 1500s to the 1800s.

In the early 1500s people lived in fairly small households, but families were not as clearly separated from the wider community as today. Stone (1980) argues that the family at that time was not a major focus of *emotional* attachment or dependence. People did not experience, or look for, the emotional closeness associated with 'family' today. This type of family was succeeded by a 'transitional form' that lasted from the early seventeenth to the beginning of the eighteenth century. This nuclear family became more clearly separated from the community, and there was a growing stress on the importance of marital and parental love. The third phase saw the rise of affective individualism – the formation of marriage ties on the basis of personal selection, guided by sexual attraction or romantic love, a situation that continues today.

In *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1993), Giddens explored how intimate relationships have changed in modern societies as a process of *individualization* takes hold. Major collectivities, such as social class cultures and strong local communities, that structured social life, providing guidelines and a sense of belonging, have been severely eroded in our age of globalization, leaving individuals 'cut adrift' from social structure and forced to make more of their own decisions about how to live.

Giddens argues that the most recent phase of modernity has seen a major transformation in the nature of intimate relationships in the development of plastic sexuality. For many people in modern societies there is much greater choice than ever before over when, how often and with whom they have sex (see chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality'). With plastic sexuality, sex can be effectively 'untied' from reproduction. This is a result partly of improved methods of contraception, which free women from the fear of repetitive pregnancies and childbirths, but also owing to the development of a sense that the self could be actively chosen in a kind of social reflexivity.

The emergence of plastic sexuality, according to Giddens, brings with it a change in the nature of love. The ideals of romantic love are fragmenting, being slowly replaced by [confluent love](#). Confluent love is active and contingent. It jars with the forever, one-and-only qualities of romantic love. The emergence of confluent love goes some way towards explaining the rise of separation and divorce, which we discuss later in the chapter. Romantic love meant that, once people had married, they usually stayed together, no matter how the relationship subsequently developed. But now people have more choice: whereas divorce was previously difficult or impossible to obtain, married people are no longer bound to stay together if the relationship does not work for them.

Rather than basing relationships on romantic passion, people are increasingly pursuing the ideal of a [pure relationship](#), in which couples remain together because they *choose* to do so. The pure relationship is held together by the acceptance of each partner that, 'until further notice', each gains sufficient benefits to make its continuance worthwhile. Love is based upon emotional intimacy that generates trust. Love develops depending on how much each partner is prepared to reveal their concerns and needs and to be vulnerable to the other.

Critics have argued that the instability of the pure relationship, which was thought of as a relationship between adults, contrasts with the complexities of family practices which include children. The concept also neglects the different experiences which men and women tend to have when an opposite-sex relationship ends. By focusing on relationships between adults, the idea of a pure relationship actually reflects the marginalization of children and childhood in sociological thought (Smart and Neale 1999). Although it helps us to understand something of the changes in intimate relations, perhaps the thesis of the pure relationship does not give enough attention to issues of space and time that are required for its construction. For example, such relationships may still involve home-building and looking after children, both of which can be seen as practical 'joint projects' requiring material resources that also contribute significantly to the maintenance of intimate relationships (Jamieson 1998).

The 'normal chaos' of love

In *The Normal Chaos of Love* (1995), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim examine the 'tumultuous' nature of personal relationships, marriages and family patterns against the backdrop of a rapidly changing world. They argue that the traditions, rules and guidelines which used to govern personal relationships no longer apply and that individuals are confronted with an endless series of choices as part of constructing, adjusting, improving or dissolving the unions they form with others. The fact that marriages are now entered into voluntarily, rather than for economic purposes or at the urging of family, brings both freedoms and new strains. In fact, the authors conclude, they demand a great deal of hard work and effort.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim see the present age as one filled with colliding interests between family, work, love and the freedom to pursue individual goals. This collision is felt acutely within personal relationships, particularly when there are two 'labour market biographies' to juggle instead of one, as more women pursue a career. Previous gendered work patterns are less fixed than they once were, as both men and women now place emphasis on their professional and personal needs. Relationships in the modern age are not just about relationships; they are also about work, politics, economics, professions and inequality. It is therefore not surprising that antagonisms between men and women are rising. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim claim that the 'battle between the sexes' is the 'central drama of our times', evidenced by the growth of the marriage-counselling industry, family courts, marital self-help groups and high divorce rates. Yet, even though they seem to be more 'flimsy' than ever before, marriage and family life remain very important to people. Divorce is more common, but rates of

remarriage are high. The birth rate may be declining, but there is a huge demand for fertility treatment. Fewer people choose to get married, but the desire to live with someone as part of a couple holds steady. How do we explain such apparently competing tendencies?

With many dual-income families now involving mothers in full-time employment, we have seen the re-emergence of traditional institutions such as schools training professional nannies.

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's answer is simple: love. They argue that today's 'battle of the sexes' is the clearest possible indication of people's 'hunger for love'. People marry for the sake of love, divorce for the sake of love, and engage in an endless cycle of hoping, regretting and trying again. While, on the one hand, the tensions between men and women are high, there remains a deep hope and faith in the possibility of finding true love and fulfilment. This may appear too simple an answer, but Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue that it is precisely because our world is so overwhelming, impersonal, abstract and rapidly changing that love has become increasingly important. Love is the only place where people can truly 'find themselves' and connect with others:

Love is a search for oneself, a craving to really get in contact with me and you, sharing bodies, sharing thoughts, encountering one another with nothing held back, making confessions and being forgiven, understanding, confirming and supporting what was and what is, longing for a home and trust to counteract the doubts and anxieties modern life generates. If nothing seems certain or safe, if even breathing is risky in a polluted world, then people chase after the misleading dreams of love until they suddenly turn into nightmares. (1995: 175–6)

Critics have attacked Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's exclusive focus on heterosexuality – the battle between the sexes is the 'central drama of our times' – which seems to marginalize LGBT relationships (Smart and Neale 1999). The thesis can also be criticized for its reliance on the concept of 'individualization', which plays down or fails to acknowledge the continuing importance of social class and community in structuring opportunities and shaping personal relationships. For instance, by no means do all women enjoy the kinds of lifelong, middle-class careers outlined by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim. Smart (2007) argues that the focus on the individual who makes free, rational choices fails to appreciate that personal life is necessarily 'relational'; that is, it takes place within networks of relationships. Hence, the individualization thesis, despite its insights, overstates the extent to which people can ever really be 'cut loose' from wider social structures and networks.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> To what extent do you think *love* is capable of holding families together? What other factors continue to play a part in maintaining the family *as a social institution* regardless of its diverse forms?

Liquid love?

As with Giddens and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, Bauman (2003: viii) argued that relationships are 'the hottest talk of the town and ostensibly the sole game worth playing, despite their notorious risks'. His book *Liquid Love* concerns the 'frailty of human bonds', the feeling of insecurity to which this frailty leads, and our responses to it. Bauman

writes that the hero of his book is 'the man or woman without bonds' (of family, class, religion or marriage) or at least without any fixed, unbreakable ties. The ties Bauman's hero does have are loosely knotted, so they can be released again with little delay if circumstances change. And, for Bauman, the circumstances will change and often. He uses the 'liquid' metaphor to describe modern society, which he sees as characterized by constant change and a lack of lasting bonds.

Bauman maintains that, in a world of rampant individualization, relationships are a mixed blessing, filled with conflicting desires, which pull in different ways. On the one hand, there is the desire for freedom, for loose bonds from which we can escape if we so choose. On the other, there is the desire for greater security that is gained by tightening the bonds between partners and ourselves. As it is, Bauman argues, people swing back and forth between the two polarities of security and freedom. Often they run to experts – therapists or columnists, for example – for advice on how to combine the two. Bauman (2003: ix) sees this as attempting 'to eat the cake and have it, to cream off the sweet delights of relationship while omitting its bitter and tougher bits'. The result is a society of 'semi-detached couples' in 'top pocket relationships'. By the phrase 'top pocket relationships', he means something that can be pulled out when needed but pushed into the pocket when no longer required.

One response to the 'frailty of human bonds' is to replace quality in our relationships for quantity. It is not the depth of our relationships but the number of contacts that we have which then becomes important to us. That is partly why, Bauman argues, we are always talking on mobile phones, sending texts in truncated sentences to increase the speed at which they can be sent. It is not the message itself that is important but the constant circulation of messages, without which we feel excluded. Bauman notes that people now speak more of connections and networks and less of relationships. To be in a relationship means to be mutually engaged, but networks suggest fleeting moments of being in touch.

Bauman's ideas are certainly insightful, but critics see their basis as weak and not grounded in empirical research. For example, too much is perhaps made of magazines and the short-term impact on social

relationships of devices such as mobile phones and computers. Like Giddens and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, Bauman is accused of being too pessimistic about contemporary social change, especially the transformation of intimate relationships he identifies. Yet is his assessment realistic? Some think not. Smart (2007) takes issue with all theories of individualization, seeing them as exaggerating the extent of family fragmentation and the decline of relationship commitment. Instead, she suggests that *personal life*, rather than 'the family' or 'the individual', is characterized by strong social and emotional bonds alongside the sharing of memories and experience.

Smart suggests that the concept of personal life encompasses people's pursuit of a 'life project' (as described in the work of Beck and Giddens, for example) but always relates such individual projects to the wider familial and social context within which they make sense. Smart (2007) argues that Beck's work, for instance, often gives the impression that individuals have been 'cut free' from social structures – a very unrealistic and antisociological notion. Instead, she says, 'mean-ing-constitutive traditions' are important here, as well as such structural factors as social class, ethnicity and gender. She attributes particular importance to collective memories transmitted across generations as well as to the way in which people are embedded within social structures and 'imagined communities'.

Studying personal life alerts sociologists to something that Smart sees missing in the theories discussed above – namely, *connectedness* or *relationality*. By this, she means all the ways in which people maintain their social relationships and associations in different times and contexts, along with the memories, feelings and experiences of being connected to others. Studying connectedness rather than fragmentation allows macrosociological theories to reconnect with the large amount of empirical research on families and relationships and thus to get closer to – and understand better – people's real-life experiences. The personal life perspective, initiated by Smart, has proved attractive to those studying family life and, over the last fifteen years or so, has developed into an established sub-field of sociology (May and Nordqvist 2019: 7).

Clearly, these debates and the view we take of recent social change cover some of the big contemporary social and political questions, but what do they mean for the debate about the decline, or otherwise, of family values?

Marriage, divorce and separation

The normalization of divorce

For many centuries in the West and other parts of the world, marriage was regarded as virtually indissoluble. A divorce was granted only in very limited cases, such as the non-consummation of marriage. Today, however, legal divorce is possible in virtually all societies under certain conditions. Only in the Philippines and the Vatican City is divorce still not generally allowed. Most countries have moved towards making divorce more readily available by introducing 'no fault' divorce laws, such as the UK's 1969 Divorce Reform Act.

Between 1960 and 1970 the divorce rate in England and Wales grew by a steady 9 per cent each year and doubled within that decade. By 1972 it had doubled again, partly as a result of the 1969 Act, which made it easier for people in marriages that had long been 'dead' to obtain a divorce. The annual number of divorces of opposite-sex couples hit a peak of 165,000 in 1993, but since 2004 the number has steadily fallen, to 101,669 in 2017. This represents a rate of 8.4 divorces per 1,000 married men and women (aged sixteen and over), the lowest divorce rate since 1973 and 40 per cent below the 1993 peak. Of course, this figure remains high compared with those of previous periods. The percentage of marriages that end in divorce today is 42 per cent, a figure that has been rising since the 1970s, when it was 22 per cent (ONS 2018a: 9). The rising number of divorces in England and Wales from around 1970 (up to 2004) went hand in hand with a fall in the number of marriages (figure 15.2).

Taking a long-term view of European-wide marriage and divorce rates, figure 15.3 demonstrates a similar pattern. However, there are national exceptions in some Eastern European countries such as Romania and Croatia, where divorce rates have actually fallen. Marriage rates since the 1970s reduced steadily across the twenty-eight EU nations, apart

from in the Nordic countries – Sweden, Denmark, Norway and Iceland – and some Eastern European states such as Latvia and Poland. Comparing national statistics shows that the patterns of marriage and divorce in the UK are far from unique but form part of broader, Europe-wide social trends.

Divorce rates are not a direct index of marital unhappiness. For one thing, rates of divorce do not include people who are separated but not legally divorced. Moreover, people who are unhappily married may choose to stay together – because they believe in the sanctity of marriage, worry about the financial or emotional consequences of a break-up, or wish to remain with each other to give their children a 'family' home.
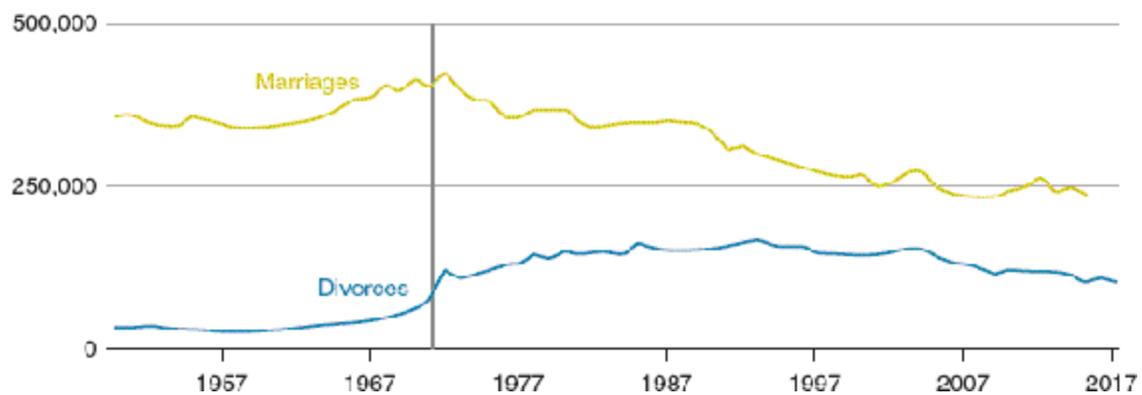
Figure 15.2 Number of marriages and divorces, opposite-sex couples, England and Wales, 1950–2017

Source: ONS (2018a: 4).
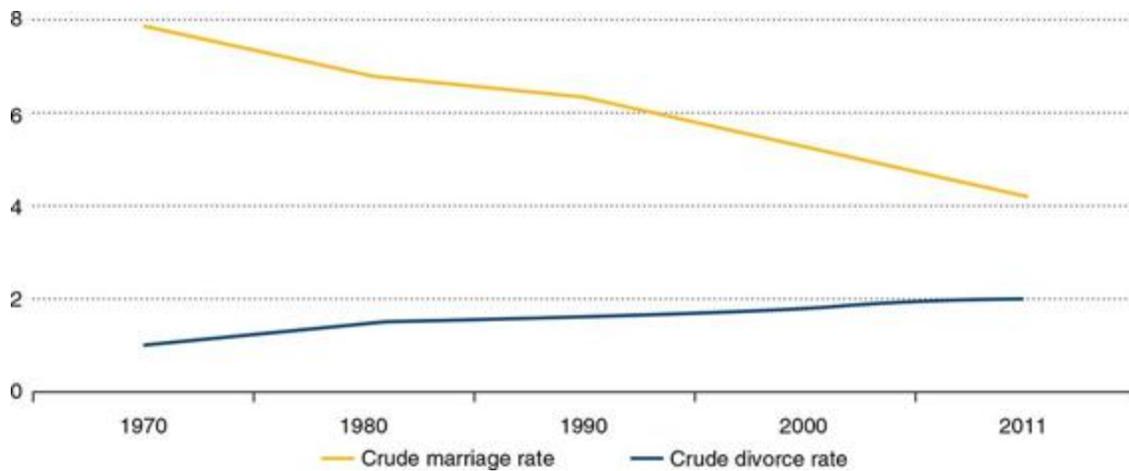
Figure 15.3 Crude marriage and divorce rates (per 1,000 inhabitants) in the EU-28, 1970–2011

Source: Eurostat (2015b).

Why has divorce become more common? Several factors linked to wider social changes have been identified. Except in the case of a very small proportion of wealthy people, marriage no longer has much connection with the desire to pass on property and status. Also, as women become more economically independent, marriage is less of a necessary economic partnership than it used to be. Greater overall prosperity and more women working means that it is easier than it used to be to establish a separate household if there is marital disaffection. A further important factor is the growing tendency to evaluate marriage in terms of the levels of personal satisfaction it offers. Overall, high divorce rates do not seem to indicate deep dissatisfaction with the institution of marriage but, rather, show an increased determination to make marriage a rewarding and satisfying relationship.

Single-parent households

Single-parent households have become increasingly common in the developed countries since the early 1970s, though the pattern is quite varied even across a distinct region such as the European Union. In 2018, single parents made up 15 per cent of EU households overall. Denmark had the highest proportion, with one in three households consisting of a single adult with children. In Lithuania (26 per cent) and

Sweden (24 per cent), between onefifth and one-quarter of all households was a single adult with children. Conversely, among the lowest proportions were Croatia, with just 6 per cent of households being single adults with children, Romania, with 7 per cent, and Greece, Slovenia and Finland all at 8 per cent (Eurostat 2018d).

It is important to note that single parenthood with dependent children is an overwhelmingly female category and that, on average, these households are among the poorest groups in society. In addition, many single parents, whether they have ever been married or not, still face social disapproval as well as economic insecurity, though some of the more judgemental terms, such as 'deserted wives', 'fatherless families' or 'broken homes', are slowly disappearing.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

15.1 Diane Vaughan on 'uncoupling': the experience of breaking up

In *Uncoupling: Turning Points in Intimate Relationships* (1990), Diane Vaughan analysed the relationships between partners during the course of separation or divorce. She carried out a series of interviews with more than 100 recently separated or divorced people (mainly from middle-class backgrounds) to chart the transition from living together to living apart. The notion of uncoupling refers to the break-up of a long-term intimate relationship. Vaughan found that in many cases, before the physical parting, there had been a social separation – at least one of the partners developed a new pattern of life, becoming interested in new pursuits and making new friends in contexts in which the other was not present. This usually meant keeping secrets from the other – especially, of course, when a relationship with a lover was involved.

According to Vaughan's research, uncoupling is often unintentional at first. One individual – whom she called the initiator – becomes less satisfied with the relationship than the other and creates a 'territory' independent of the activities in which the couple engages together. For some time before this, the initiator may have been trying unsuccessfully to change the partner, to get him or her to behave in more acceptable ways. At some point, the initiator feels that the attempt has failed and that the relationship is fundamentally flawed. From then onwards, he or she becomes preoccupied with the ways in which the relationship or the partner is defective. Vaughan suggests this is the opposite of the process of 'falling in love' at the beginning of a relationship, when an individual focuses on the attractive features of the other, ignoring those that might be less acceptable.

Initiators seriously considering a break notably discuss their relationship extensively with others, 'comparing notes'. In doing so, they weigh the costs and benefits of separation. Can I survive on my own? How will friends and parents react? Will the children suffer? Will I be financially solvent? Having thought about these and other problems, some decide to try again to make the relationship work. For those who proceed with a separation, these discussions and enquiries help make the break less intimidating, building confidence that they are doing the right thing. Most initiators become convinced that a responsibility for their own self-development takes priority over commitment to the other.

Of course, uncoupling is not always entirely led by one individual. The other partner may also have decided that the relationship cannot be saved. In some situations, an abrupt reversal of roles occurs. The person who previously wanted to save the relationship becomes determined to end it, while the erstwhile initiator wishes to carry on.

<div style="border:1px solid black">

THINKING CRITICALLY

In any country of your choice, find out from official statistics whether men or women in opposite-sex marriages initiated the most divorces this year. What social, economic and emotional factors could account for the disparity?

</div>

The category of single-parent household is also internally diverse. For instance, UK data show that, in 2019, almost 15 per cent of families were headed by a single parent, an increase of 14.5 per cent since 1999 (ONS 2019j). More than half of widowed mothers are owner-occupiers, but the vast majority of single mothers who have never married live in rented accommodation. Single parenthood tends to be a changing state, and its boundaries are blurred by multiple paths both into and out of the status. In the case of a person whose spouse dies, the break is obviously clear-cut – although even here a person might have been living on his or her own in practical terms if the partner was in hospital

for some while before they died. However, about 60 per cent of single-parent households today are brought about by separation or divorce.

Among single-parent families in the UK, the fastest growing category is that of single mothers who have never married, which constitutes around 9 per cent of the total number of families with dependent children. Of these, it is difficult to know how many have chosen to raise children alone. The ongoing *Millennium Cohort Study*, which follows the lives of some 19,000 children born in 2000–1, has found that younger women are more likely to become solo mothers and that, the more highly educated the woman, the more likely she is to have a baby *within* marriage. The research also reveals that, for 85 per cent of solo mothers, their pregnancy was unplanned, in contrast to 52 per cent of cohabiting couples and 18 per cent of married women.

For the majority of unmarried or nevermarried mothers, there is also a strong correlation between the rate of births outside marriage and indicators of poverty and social deprivation (Kiernan and Mensah 2010). However, a growing minority of women are now choosing to have a child or children without the support of a spouse or partner, often through donor insemination (Golombok et al. 2016). 'Single mothers by choice' (Herz 2006) is an apt description of this category of single parent, and it usually applies to professional women with sufficient resources to manage satisfactorily as a single-parent household.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

15.2 Carol Smart and Bren Neale's *Family Fragments*?

Between 1994 and 1996, Carol Smart and Bren Neale carried out two rounds of interviews with a group of sixty parents from West Yorkshire who had either separated or divorced after the passage of the 1989 Children Act. This Act altered the situation facing parents and children on divorce by abolishing the old notions of 'custody' and 'access' so parents would no longer feel that they had to fight. It also encouraged parents to share child-rearing and required judges and others to listen more to the views of children. Smart and Neale were interested to know how patterns of parenting were initially formed after divorce and how they changed over time. They compared parents' expectations about post-divorce parenting at the point of separation with the 'reality' of their circumstances one year later.

Smart and Neale found that parenting after divorce involved a process of constant adjustment that many had not anticipated and for which they were ill-prepared. Skills which worked as part of a two-parent team were not necessarily successful in a single-parent household. Adults were forced to re-evaluate continuously their approaches to parenting, not only in terms of 'big decisions' affecting their children but also with regard to the everyday aspects of child-rearing occurring across two new households. Following divorce, parents faced two opposing demands – their own needs for separation and distance from their former spouse and the need to remain connected as part of co-parenting responsibilities.

Smart and Neale found that the lived experience of post-divorce parenting was extremely fluid and changed over time. When interviewed a year after separation, many re-evaluated their behaviour and actions in the light of their changing understanding. For example, many were worried about the harm their children would suffer as a result of divorce but were unsure how to

transform their fears and sense of guilt into constructive action. This led some to hold on tightly to their children or to treat them like 'adult' confidants. In other cases it led to alienation, distance and the loss of meaningful connections.

In the media and some political contexts, the authors argued, there is an implicit – sometimes explicit – assumption that, after divorce, adults abandon family morality and begin to act more selfishly. Flexibility, generosity, compromise and sensitivity disappear, and the previous moral framework for making decisions about family and welfare is discarded. Smart and Neale's interviews led them to reject this argument. They claim that people do operate within a moral framework when parenting, but it is best understood as a 'morality of care' rather than an unambiguous moral reasoning. They argue that, as parents care for their children, so decisions emerge about 'the proper thing to do'. These decisions are highly contextual and parents must weigh many considerations, including the effects on the children, whether it is the appropriate time to act, and what harmful implications it might have on the co-parenting relationship.

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"Thanks to separations, divorces and remarriages, I've got 20 grandparents."

Smart and Neale conclude that divorce unleashes changes in circumstances which can rarely be 'put straight' once and for all. Successful post-divorce parenting demands constant negotiation and communication. While the 1989 Children's Act has added necessary flexibility to contemporary post-divorce arrangements, its emphasis on the welfare of the child may overlook the crucial role played by the quality of the relationship between divorced parents.

Morgan (1999) argues that there is a direct link between differential levels of welfare support for single parents and the diverse proportions of single-parent families seen across Europe. The main reason why Sweden and the UK have relatively high proportions of single-parent families compared with, say, Italy is because Italian family allowances have been very low and the primary source of support for young people is other family members. Morgan argues that, in states where it is not subsidized, single parenting is simply less prevalent. But is this overly simplistic? The diversity of 'pathways' into and out of single-parent families means they do not constitute a uniform or cohesive group in the first place and, though they share some material and social disadvantages, they do not have a collective identity. The plurality of routes means that, for the purposes of social policy, the boundaries of single parenthood are hard to define and needs are difficult to target.

New partnerships, 'blended' families and kin relations

LGBTQ+ partnerships

Many people today live in same-sex couples. Most countries in the world still do not sanction same-sex marriage, though this is changing, which means that intimate relationships between gay men and between lesbians in such jurisdictions are grounded in personal commitment and mutual trust rather than law. The term 'families of choice' has sometimes been applied to LGBTQ+ partnerships to reflect the positive and creative new forms of family life. Many traditional features of opposite-sex partnerships – such as mutual support, care and responsibility in illness, the joining of finances, and so on – are

becoming integrated into gay and lesbian relationships in ways that were not possible in earlier times.

Same-sex relationships as the basis for family life are increasingly accepted around the world, but legalization of same-sex marriage and parenting rights for same-sex couples still lag behind this social change.

A very significant recent trend in Western European countries, which has long been campaigned for by lesbian and gay movements, is the introduction of registered or civil partnerships and the extension of marriage rights to same-sex couples.

Lesbian and gay social movements are discussed in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Civil partnerships are legally recognized unions between two people of the same sex, though technically they are not 'marriages' in any

religious sense. Nonetheless, couples who become legally 'partnered' generally have the same legal rights as married couples on a range of issues. For example, civil partners can expect equal treatment on financial matters such as inheritance, pensions and child maintenance, and they have rights as 'next of kin'. Immigration rules take account of civil partnerships and marriages in the same way. In Britain, new legislation came into force in December 2005, giving same-sex couples in civil partnerships similar rights to married couples. By mid-2009, some 34,000 civil partnerships had been formed in the UK, though the initial backlog of couples appears to have cleared by 2008, which saw a fall of some 18 per cent on the previous year (ONS 2010a: 22).

Figure 15.4 Countries that permit same-sex marriage, or in which it is legal in some regions, 2019

Source: Masci and DeSilver (2019).

Denmark was the first state to grant same-sex partners the same rights as married couples, in 1989, followed in 1996 by Norway, Sweden and Iceland and in 2000 by Finland. The Netherlands introduced full civil marriage rights in 2001. Belgium and Spain introduced gay marriage rights in 2003 and 2005 respectively, England and Wales and Scotland legislated for same-sex marriage in 2014, while Australia, Malta and Germany decided to do the same in 2017. By June 2019, some thirty-two countries had allowed same-sex marriage (Masci and DeSilver

2019; [figure 15.4](#)). Although this is still a very small proportion of the world's societies, the trend looks likely to continue despite opposition from some religious groups, which see legal recognition of same-sex partnerships as legitimizing 'immoral' relationships.

Since the 1980s there has been a growing research interest in LGBTQ+ partnerships. Sociologists have seen same-sex relationships as displaying forms of intimacy and equality that are sometimes, and in some respects, quite different from those common among opposite-sex couples. Because same-sex relationships have been excluded from the institution of marriage, and because traditional gender roles are not easily applicable, same-sex partnerships must be constructed and negotiated beyond the norms and guidelines that govern opposite-sex unions. Some have suggested that the 1980s AIDS epidemic was an important factor in the development of a distinctive culture of care and commitment among same-sex partners.

Weeks et al. (2004) point to three significant patterns within gay and lesbian partnerships. First, there is more opportunity for equality between partners because they are not guided by the gendered cultural assumptions that underpin heterosexual relationships. Gay and lesbian couples may choose to shape their relationships to avoid the inequalities and power imbalances characteristic of many opposite-sex couples. Second, same-sex partners negotiate the parameters and inner workings of the relationship. If opposite-sex couples are influenced by socially embedded gender roles, same-sex couples face fewer expectations about who should do what within the relationship. Women tend to do more of the housework and childcare in opposite-sex marriages, but there are no such expectations within same-sex partnerships. Everything becomes a matter for negotiation, which may result in a more equal sharing of responsibilities. However, such negotiations can also be a source of disputes and disagreements. Third, LGBTQ+ partnerships demonstrate a particular form of commitment that lacks institutional backing. Mutual trust, a willingness to work at difficulties and a shared responsibility for 'emotional labour' seem to be the hallmarks of such partnerships (Weeks 1999). It will be interesting for sociologists to observe how civil partnerships and gay marriage

rights affect such commitment and mutual trust as they become fully established.

A relaxation of previously intolerant attitudes towards homosexuality has been accompanied by a growing willingness in the courts to allocate custody of children to mothers living in lesbian relationships. Techniques of artificial insemination mean that lesbians may have children and become parents without any heterosexual contact, while a number of recent legal victories for same-sex couples indicate that their rights are gradually becoming enshrined in law.

Legal rights of LGBTQ+ couples are discussed further in [chapter 7](), 'Gender and Sexuality'.

Remarriage

Remarriage can involve a variety of circumstances. Some remarried couples are in their early twenties, neither of them bringing a child to the new relationship. Couples that remarry in their late twenties, their thirties or their early forties might each take one child or more from the first marriage to live with them. Those who remarry at later ages might have adult children who never live in the homes that the new partners establish. There may also be children within the new marriage itself, and either partner of the new couple may previously have been single, divorced or widowed. Sociologically, this means that generalizations about remarriage must be made with considerable caution, though some general points are worth making.

In 1900, about nine-tenths of all marriages in the UK were first marriages, and most remarriages involved at least one widowed person. With the rise in the divorce rate from the 1970s, the level of remarriage also began to climb, and an increasing proportion of remarriages now involve divorced people. In 1970, 18 per cent of UK marriages were remarriages (for at least one partner); by 1996 that

figure was 42 per cent, a high point. By 2007 remarriages (for at least one partner) was falling (to 38 per cent), and in 2013 it stood at 33 per cent (ONS 2019l: 4). These statistics do not provide a full picture of post-divorce partnerships, however, as they do not take into account levels of cohabitation following divorce.

People who have been married and divorced are more likely to marry again than single people in comparable age groups are to marry for the first time. At all age levels, divorced men are more likely to remarry than divorced women: three in every four divorced women, but five in every six divorced men, remarry. Odd though it might seem, the best way to maximize the chances of getting married, for both sexes, is to have been married before! However, in statistical terms, remarriages are less successful than first marriages. Rates of divorce from second marriages are higher than those from first marriages. This does not show that second marriages are doomed to fail. People who have been divorced may have higher expectations of marriage than those who have not. Hence they may be more ready to dissolve a new marriage. It is quite possible that the second marriages which endure might be more satisfying, on average, than first marriages.

Blended or step-families

The term 'step-family' refers to a family in which at least one of the adults has children from a previous marriage or relationship. Sociologists more often refer to such family groups as reconstituted families or blended families. There are clearly joys and benefits associated with blended families and the growth of the expanded families which result. But certain difficulties can arise. First, there is usually a biological parent living elsewhere whose influence over the child or children is likely to remain powerful.

Second, cooperative relations between divorced people are often strained when one or both remarry. Take the case of a woman with two children who marries a man who also has two children and they all live together. If the non-resident parents insist that children visit them at the same times as before the marriage, the tensions involved in melding such a newly established household together can be exacerbated. For

example, it may prove impossible ever to get all the members together at weekends, leading to resentment and arguments.

Third, blended families involve children from different backgrounds, who may have varying expectations of what constitutes appropriate behaviour within the family. Since most of the children 'belong' to two households, the likelihood that there will be clashes in habits and outlook is high (Smith 1990). There are few established norms which define the relationship between step-parent and step-child. Should a child call a new step-parent by name, or is 'Dad' or 'Mum' more appropriate? Should the step-parent discipline the children? How should a step-parent treat the new spouse of his or her previous partner when collecting the children? These and many other matters have to be resolved in practice through suggestion and negotiation. This is one area which is particularly suited to research rooted in Morgan's family practices approach, which could help us to understand how blended families manage their relationships.

Blended families are also developing new types of kinship connection and creating new difficulties and possibilities through remarriage after divorce. Members of these families are developing their own ways of adjusting to the relatively uncharted circumstances in which they find themselves. Some authors today speak of [binuclear families](#), meaning that the two households which form after divorce still comprise one single family group on account of the shared responsibility for raising children.

In the face of such rich and often confusing familial transformations, perhaps the most appropriate conclusion to be drawn is a simple one: although marriages are broken up by divorce, family relationships continue. Especially where children are involved, many ties persist despite the reconstructed family connections brought into being through remarriage.

Cohabitation

[Cohabitation](#) – when two people live together in a sexual relationship without being married – has become increasingly widespread in the developed countries. Rather than focusing on marriage, today it may be

more appropriate to speak of coupling and uncoupling, as we do when discussing the experience of divorce. A growing number of couples in committed long-term relationships choose not to marry but to reside together and raise children. It is also the case that many older people choose to cohabit following a divorce rather than or in advance of remarrying.

Across Europe, cohabitation was previously regarded as somewhat scandalous and attracted a social stigma. Until 1979, the UK *General Household Survey* – the main source of data on British households – did not even include a question on cohabitation. But, among young people in Britain and wider Europe, attitudes to cohabitation have changed quite rapidly. For example, by 2004, presented with the statement that 'It is alright for a couple to live together without intending to get married', 88 per cent of British people aged between eighteen and twenty-four in 2004 agreed, while only 40 per cent of those aged sixty-five and over did so (ONS 2004).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

15.3 Bean-pole families

Julia Brannen (2003) argues that the UK has entered an age of the 'bean-pole family'. She suggests that the family household is just one part of a network of kin relations that increasingly consists of several generations. This is largely because people are living longer. She notes that, by age fifty, three-fifths of the UK population have at least one parent still alive and just over a third are grandparents. There is also a rise in the number of four-generation families – families that include great-grandchildren.

As the 'vertical' links between family generations are extended by increasing life expectancy, so the 'horizontal' links within generations are weakening, as divorce rates rise, fertility rates fall and people have fewer children. Brannen therefore characterizes contemporary families as long and thin 'bean-pole structures' (see [figure 15.5](#)).

She found that grandparents were increasingly providing intergenerational services, particularly informal childcare for grandchildren. Demand for intergenerational support is particularly high among single-parent families, where older generations can also provide emotional support in times of need, such as during a divorce. In turn, the 'pivot generation', sandwiched between older and younger generations, often become carers for their parents (as they become elderly), their children and perhaps even their grandchildren.

As older social structures of class, religion and marriage become weaker and less constraining on individuals, one consequence seems to be, paradoxically, the strengthening of multigenerational family bonds. As people spend more years in effective relationships with parents and grandparents, so family stability and continuity are actually enhanced, and the stereotype of older people as a drain on society resources looks outdated. The nuclear family has lost its

place as the ideal family form, but the significance of 'family' clearly has not.

The family tree

The family bean-pole

David
marries Jill

Colin
marries Sally

June
marries Philip

Lucy
Matthew

John
James
Beverley

George
marries Helen

John
marries Ann

Paul

Chris + Sarah
(partners)

Stephanie
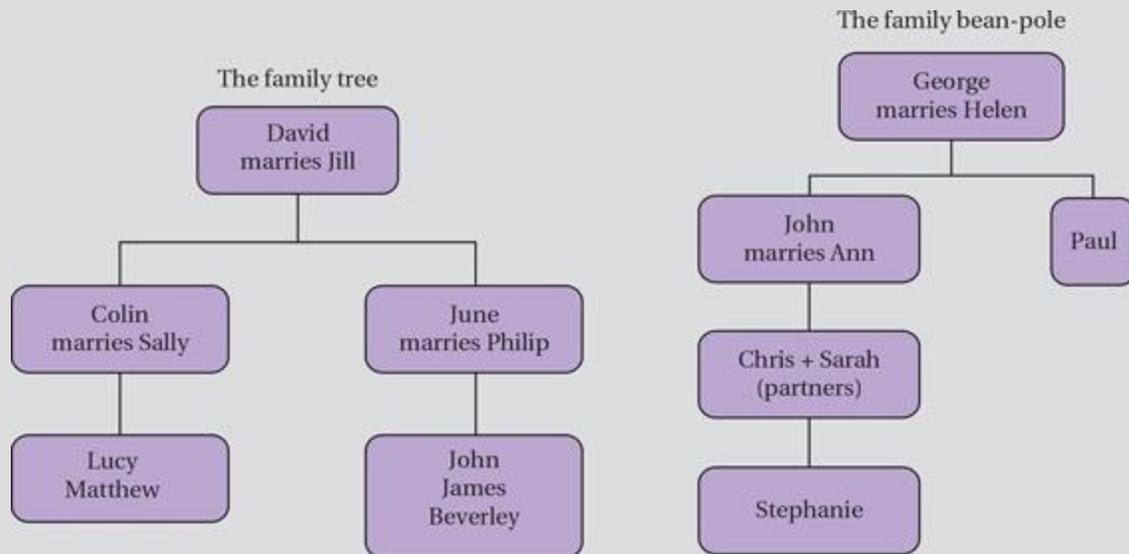
Figure 15.5 The family tree and the family bean-pole

THINKING CRITICALLY

Draw up a family tree for your own family, identifying which connections are more active and engaged than others. Does your family have a bean-pole structure?

Over recent decades, the number of unmarried men and women sharing a household has risen sharply. Only 4 per cent of UK women born in the 1920s cohabited and 19 per cent of those born in the 1940s did so. Yet between 2008 and 2018 the number of cohabiting couples in England and Wales – both same-sex and opposite-sex – increased by 25.8 per cent to become the fastest growing family type. In 2018 cohabiting couples made up 17.9 per cent of all families (ONS 2019c: 1–3). Although cohabitation has become much more popular than in the past, analysis of research data suggests that, at present, marriage tends to be more enduring. Unmarried couples who cohabit are three to four times more likely to split up than those who are married.

Young adults often find themselves living together because they drift into cohabitation rather than making a calculated plan to do so.

Cohabitation in most countries has been normalized, though primarily as a stage before eventual marriage. Wilcox et al. (2019) report that, in the USA, some 67 per cent of currently married adults had previously cohabited with their current or a previous partner. However, the length of cohabitation prior to marriage is increasing, and more people, though still a minority, choose it as an alternative to marriage. As we have seen several times in this chapter, in spite of the numerous changes in intimate relations and family life, marriage remains, perhaps surprisingly, a popular social institution.

Staying single

Recent trends in household composition raise the question as to whether we are becoming a community of single people. The proportion of one-person households in the UK increased from 14 per cent in 1971 to 28 per cent (7.7 million people) in 2017, but the latter is a slight fall from 2014, which suggests the steady rise may now be levelling off. A combination of several factors has led to the increasing number of people living alone. One is a trend towards later first marriage. In 2016 the average age of single people on first opposite-sex marriage in the UK stood at 33.4 years for men and 31.5 years for women, on average around seven years later than in 1971. For first same-sex marriage, men averaged 39.5 years and women 35.4 years (ONS 2019l: 5). Another factor, as we have seen, is the high rate of divorce. Yet another is the growing number of older people in the population whose partners have died. Indeed, nearly half of the one-person households in the UK are single-pensioner households.

Being single means different things at different periods of the life course. A larger proportion of people in their twenties are unmarried than used to be the case. By their mid-thirties, however, only a small minority of men and women have never been married. The majority of single people aged thirty to fifty are divorced and 'in-between' marriages, while most single people over fifty are widowed.

More than ever before, young people who are able to do so are leaving home to start an independent life rather than to get married, which previously was one of the most common paths out of the home. The phenomenon of 'singlehood' has led to some negative conceptualizations, particularly for women, who are expected to have married and become mothers as a 'normal' part of the life course. Lahad (2017) argues that terms such as 'singletons' in Australia and the USA, 'leftover women' in China, and 'parasite women' in Japan all speak to the perception that a growing number of single women in society is somehow problematic. Hence the trend of 'staying single' or living on one's own may be part of a societal trend that places a high value on personal independence. Nonetheless, so far, it remains the case that most people do eventually form partnerships or marry.

Kinship relations

As family structures become more fluid and diverse, sociologists are increasingly interested in understanding what is happening to relationships between family members. What ties exist among siblings and how do they perceive their obligations towards each other and to parents, grandparents and other family members? Indeed, who counts as kin anyway?

In an early study of kinship in the UK, Raymond Firth (1956) made a distinction between 'effective' and 'non-effective' kin. Effective kin are those with whom we have active social relationships; non-effective kin are those with whom we do not have regular contact but who form part of the extended family group. For example, we may be in contact with sisters and brothers every day but speak to certain cousins or uncles and aunts only at annual events such as birthdays. The distinction between effective and non-effective kin works with conventional family

groups assumed to share biological forms of kinship, but it is less able to capture the diversity of contemporary familial relations.

Sistering is a form of family practice which changes over the life course and does not adhere to a fixed set of social norms.

It is also commonplace for people to describe certain non-family members in kinship terms. For example, close friends may be known as 'uncle' or 'aunt'. Anthropologists refer to such relationships as 'fictive kin'. An awareness of different categories of kinship blurs the boundary between family and non-family members, showing that what people perceive to be 'the family' is socially constructed. As a result, kin relations have come to be discussed in terms of the wider concept of 'relatedness', which allows cross-cultural comparisons to be made without imposing the Western idea (and ideal) of what constitutes kinship (Carsten 2000). Like David Morgan's (1996, 1999) idea of family practices, the focus of this research moves from the sociologist's descriptive categories onto people's own sense of 'relatedness'.

Mauthner's (2005) qualitative study of changing forms of 'sistering' – that is, how women perform the role of sister – interviewed thirty-seven women from nineteen sets of sisters and identified four 'discourses of sistering' that shaped the women's narratives. *Best friendship* is a discourse which identifies the sibling relationship as a very intimate one that is closer than other friendships. This comes close to the common-sense idea of the biological closeness of siblings. *Companionship* can take two forms. *Close companionship* is a type of relationship that is less actively engaged and intense than best friendships but still remains very close. *Distant companionship* represents those sibling relations characterized by low levels of contact and emotional closeness, leaving sisters' attitudes towards them somewhat ambivalent. Two related discourses – *positioned relations* and *shifting positions* – then describe the dynamics of power in sibling relations. Positioned relations are shaped largely by fairly fixed roles defined by families, including older sisters who assume responsibility for younger ones or those who become 'mother substitutes' when required. By contrast, shifting positions applies to the more fluid and egalitarian relations where the exercise of power is negotiated rather than assumed.

Mauthner concludes that the practices of sistering are varied and likely to change over the life course as the dynamic of power shifts within relationships. Therefore we cannot assume that sibling relations are shaped by fixed biological and familial relations, even though the attitudes and ideals of many women (and men) may be influenced by society-wide discourses of women as primary care-givers. In short, the practice of sistering implies an active and ongoing attempt to (re-)create sibling relations compared to sister*hood*, which can be seen as implying universal role expectations.

[Families in global context](#)

Today a broad range of family forms exist across the world's societies. In some areas, such as remote regions in Asia, Africa and the Pacific Rim, longstanding traditional family patterns are little altered. Yet in many other societies there have been significant changes. The origins of these changes are complex, but several factors can be identified. One is the spread of Western culture through global mass media such as television, film and, more recently, the internet. Western ideals of romantic love have spread to societies in which they were previously unknown. Another factor is the development of centralized government in areas previously composed of autonomous smaller societies. People's lives become influenced by their involvement in a national political system, and governments make active attempts to alter traditional ways of life.

States frequently introduce programmes that advocate smaller families, the use of contraception and other measures designed as a way of controlling rapid population growth. A further influence is large-scale migration from rural to urban areas. Often men go to work in towns or cities, leaving family members in their home village. Alternatively, a nuclear family group will move as a unit to the city. In both cases, traditional family forms and kinship systems may become weakened as a result. Finally, employment opportunities away from the land and in organizations such as government bureaucracies, mines and plantations, and – where they exist – industrial firms tend to have disruptive consequences for family systems previously centred on agricultural production in the local community.

The combination of these factors has generated a worldwide movement that begins to break down extended family systems and household kinship groups, though relations between kinspeople continue to be important sources of social bonds. More than fifty years ago, Goode (1963) argued that, as modernization spreads around the world, the nuclear family would become the dominant form because it allows the kind of geographical mobility required by industrial capitalism. But the sheer pace of globalization has led to changes that Goode simply could

not have foreseen. Rather than a single family form becoming dominant across the world, it may be that families are, in fact, becoming increasingly diverse.

Merging or diversifying family patterns?

Recent empirical studies of family lives in a global perspective have reinforced the conclusion that diversity is still the most accurate characterization of family structures around the world. The Swedish sociologist Göran Therborn's *Between Sex and Power* (2004) is an extensive global history of the family over the entire twentieth century. Therborn discusses five major family types that have been shaped by particular religious or philosophical worldviews: sub-Saharan African (Animist); European/North American (Christian); East Asian (Confucian); South Asian (Hindu) and West Asian/North African (Islamic). Two others – South-East Asian and Creole American – are described as 'interstitial systems', combining elements from more than one of the five major types. The institution of the family, Therborn argues, has been structured by three central elements across all these types: patriarchy or male dominance, marriage and nonmarriage in the regulation of sexual behaviour, and fertility and birth control measures in the production of demographic trends. Focusing on these three elements allows international comparisons to be made, and we can take each element in turn.

Patriarchal power *within* the family has generally declined over the twentieth century. And Therborn identifies two key periods of change. The first was during and after the First World War (1914–18), when women demonstrated by contributing to the war effort that there were no physical barriers to women's work, while the Russian Revolution of 1917 challenged the patriarchal ideology of women's 'natural' domestic role in favour of egalitarian ideals. The second was between the sexual revolution of the late 1960s and the 1975 'International Women's Year', when second-wave feminism reinforced the shifting position of women and legislative measures enabled them to participate more equally in public life.

Of course, the realities of life 'on the ground' are not suddenly transformed by the formal lifting of legal restrictions, and the extent of gender inequality remains a matter of research and debate. The second period of change, argues Therborn, was more noticeable in Europe and America, with less pronounced changes in the family situations of South Asia, West Asia and North Africa and sub-Saharan Africa. In more recent years, he sees evidence that the economic power of women has been growing in the textile and electronics industries in the developing world, which could reshape patriarchal family relations there too.

Marriage and family patterns changed across the world in the twentieth century, but Therborn's studies lead to a different conclusion from that reached by Goode. The different family types are *not* becoming increasingly similar, nor are they conforming to the 1950s Western nuclear family model. In most developed countries, intimate relationships have become more open and less bound by tradition, especially since the 1970s. The combination of increasing rates of divorce, high remarriage rates and more people living alone seems to disprove the thesis of a convergence of family structures, even in the West. Therborn argues that there is no evidence that such change and fluidity are spreading globally.

Therborn also sees a major change in the last century to be a falling global fertility rate, with the significant exception of sub-Saharan Africa. This is the product of more effective birth control methods, rising economic prosperity and the increasing movement of women into the workforce, thereby improving their own position. As we discuss in detail in [chapter 14](), 'The Life Course', such demographic changes will mean, for most countries, that population will decline and societies will 'age', with a higher proportion of older people living longer.

If diversity is the most notable feature of families across the world, are there *any* general patterns emerging? The most important general changes are that clans and other kin-based groups are declining in influence; there is a trend towards the free selection of a spouse; the rights of women are becoming more widely recognized at a formal level in both the initiation of marriage and within families; there are higher levels of sexual freedom for men and women; there is a general trend towards granting and extending children's rights; and, finally, there is

an increased acceptance of same-sex partnerships, though this is unevenly distributed across the world. We should not exaggerate the extent of these trends, as many are still being fought for and are bitterly contested.

Conclusion

Therborn's study shows that, in spite of some convergence, families across the world are not being transformed in the direction suggested by theories of individualization and de-traditionalization. These theories seem to have most relevance to some of the developed industrial nations, where there has been an enormous amount of change in family structures and mores, attitudes to sex and intimacy, gender relations, marriage and divorce rates, and acceptance of LGBTQ+ relationships. How increasing levels of short- and long-term migration will alter the global situation cannot be forecast with any certainty.

Yet many, perhaps most, still see family as the most significant part of their lives. And, as the movement for civil partnerships and equal marriage for LGBTQ+ couples also demonstrates, 'family' still has an enormous attraction not just legally, but emotionally too. Despite Parsonian functionalism appearing to be defunct, paradoxically it may still have an important insight to offer. Functionalist theory tells us that social institutions survive only if they are able to adapt to changing circumstances. As they do so, they change, often quite radically, and may look very different from previous incarnations. Yet they continue to perform similarly vital functions for individuals, communities and societies, which is why they endure. However changed and diverse it may be today, the institution of 'family' (not *the* family) remains a fundamental part of people's experience over the whole life course.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. Outline the main aspects of functionalist perspectives on the family. Has this perspective been undermined by post-1950s social change?

2. Feminist theorizing changed family studies for ever. How? Explain why the family came to be seen by some as essentially an 'anti-social' institution.

3. In what ways did David Morgan criticize the conventional sociology of the family?

4. What do sociologists mean by 'family practices'? How can this approach be seen as an advance on the old sociology of the family?

5. Is increasing gender equality in the public sphere also leading to a more equal sharing of housework between men and women? Which aspects of domestic labour are proving hardest to change? Why do you think this is?

6. Review the evidence on increasing family diversity. Is the nuclear family type in long-term decline? Are there any grounds for thinking that the nuclear family will survive?

7. Briefly rehearse the key arguments of Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, and Bauman on the 'transformation of intimacy'. Is continuing individualization an unstoppable social process today?

8. On the basis of statistical evidence, outline the contemporary patterns of divorce, marriage and remarriage. Does the evidence suggest that the institution of marriage is rapidly losing its value for younger generations?

9. The introduction of civil partnerships and same-sex marriage across the world shows an increasing acceptance of LGBTQ+ relationships. Do these extend rather than further erode the nuclear family model?

10. It has been argued that diversification is the best description of families in a global context. Is this process at odds with ongoing globalization?

🔍 **Research in practice**

'Blood is thicker than water', or so an old saying goes. But is it? The strength of familial relationships has been the subject of a good deal of research in the sociology of family life. Today's diversity and complexity of family structures is, in part at least, linked to the normalization of divorce. As divorce rates have risen and previously married individuals re-partner and remarry, this produces many more blended families with a variety of residential arrangements. Are biological parent–child relations really stronger than step-parent–step-child relations? What happens to these relationships as children become adults? The study below tries to test that old saying by examining relationships between parents/step-parents and their adult children/step-children. Read the article then tackle the questions that follow.

> Kalmijn, M., De Leeuw, S. G., Hornstra, M., Ivanova, K., Van Gaalen, R., and Van Houdt, K. (2019) 'Family Complexity into Adulthood: The Central Role of Mothers in Shaping Intergenerational Ties', *American Sociological Review*, 84(5): 876–904.
>
> 1. What method has been used in this study? How was it actually carried out?
>
> 2. What advantages are there in studying parent–child relations using adult children rather than young children?
>
> 3. Describe the significance for strong parent–child relations of each of the following: length of co-residence, marriage, cohabitation and adoption.
>
> 4. 'Biology matters most for mothers' (p. 899). Explain why the authors say this and describe the gender differences uncovered in this study.
>
> 5. Is blood really thicker than water? What evidence is there in this paper which supports this saying and what evidence is there against it?

⚙ [Thinking it through](#)

Consider your own interactions with family and friends. List all of those practices that you consider to be 'familial' or family practices. For example, think about meals and eating out, using social media, going to a cinema, taking a day out, visiting relatives and performing household tasks. Turn your list into a 1,000-word paper covering the following points.

- Describe the practices in detail.

- Explain the importance of the practice in reproducing family bonds.

- Discuss the influence of class, ethnicity, gender and disability on the performance.

- Show how your family practices differ from other activities.

In the essay, discuss the possibility of separating the *structural* from the *agency* elements of family practices. Despite the constructionist focus of the family practices approach, are there still some key structural or institutional aspects to family life?

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

The pleasures and conflicts of families have been documented in novels, documentaries, TV series, films and paintings over many years. Historical sociologists study these representations to gain insights into how societies reflect, promote or challenge society's mainstream moral rules and behavioural norms. Watch one week's episodes of two continuing dramas (known as 'soaps') on television. Using examples from the episodes as your evidence, consider the following questions.

To what extent do the families in these programmes accurately reflect the reality of contemporary family life that emerges from this chapter? For example, how are gender relations presented? How is the domestic division of labour dealt with? Is domestic violence a theme? How about step-families or LGBTQ+ relationships? In general, do these programmes have any underlying perspective on the thorny issue of 'family values'? Do they promote a certain view of 'the family' or is family diversity central to the stories? Do soaps merely *reflect* social reality or do they use an *idealized* or *ideological* version of it?

Further reading

A good place to begin is with Deborah Chambers and Pablo Gracia's (2021) *A Sociology of Family Life* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity), which is an excellent guide to current debates. Linda McKie and Samantha Callan's (2011) *Understanding Families: A Global Introduction* (London: Sage) is also a lively, comprehensive textbook. Sociological theories can be approached via James M. White and David M. Klein's (2007) *Family Theories* (3rd edn, London: Sage), which also includes perspectives from other disciplines.

David H. J. Morgan's (2011) *Rethinking Family Practices* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) is probably the best introduction to family practices and associated ideas. *Sociology of Personal Life* (2019), edited by Vanessa May and Petra Nordqvist (London: Red Globe Press), is an excellent collection and a good introduction to this developing field. Issues around blended families are covered in Graham Allan, Graham Crow and Sheila Hawker's (2013) *Stepfamilies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), and a comprehensive account of violence within families is Ola Barnett, Cindy Miller-Perrin and Robin D. Perrin's (2010) *Family Violence across the Lifespan: An Introduction* (3rd edn, New York: Sage).

Key Concepts in Family Studies (2011), by Jane Ribbens McCarthy and Rosalind Edwards (London: Sage), is a helpful quick-reference guide, while *The Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Families* (2017), edited by Judith Treas, Jacqueline Scott and Martin Richards (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell), is a comprehensive resource with many useful chapters.

For a collection of original readings on relationships and the life course, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

The Morgan Centre for Research into Everyday Lives is named after David Morgan. It was founded in 2005 at the University of Manchester, UK:
www.socialsciences.manchester.ac.uk/morgan-centre/

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships is a research centre founded in 2001, based at the University of Edinburgh, UK:
www.crfr.ac.uk/

The Centre for Family Research at Cambridge University – a multidisciplinary centre which carries out research on children, parenting and families:
www.cfr.cam.ac.uk/

UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, family site:
www.un.org/development/desa/family/about-us.html

CHAPTER 16

EDUCATION

CONTENTS

In 2019 a wave of climate change activism saw thousands of school students around the world effectively 'striking' by staying away from school in order to protest at the lack of effective government action on climate change.

On Friday 15 February 2019, around 10,000 students across the UK walked out of classes or stayed away from their schools in order to take part in an international protest about climate change. Similar waves of activism took place in other countries, including Australia, Belgium, the USA, France, Switzerland, Germany and Japan, and have become known as 'climate strikes'. One notable feature of the school climate strikes is that many of them take place with the approval or encouragement of teachers who are responsible for children's education.

The climate strikes movement, organized by groups such as School Strikes 4 Climate Action and Fridays for the Future, developed very rapidly from the example set by a single school student in Sweden, Greta Thunberg, who went on strike to protest outside the Swedish parliament building in August 2018. Thunberg's action spread through

social media platforms and was widely reported in the mass media, leading to her being invited to the UN climate conference at the end of 2018 and then to the Davos economic summit of business leaders and politicians in January 2019. In both forums she accused adults in positions of power of behaving like children and putting profits before serious action on climate change.

In August 2018, fifteen-year-old student Greta Thunberg sparked a wave of activism by staying away from school in order to protest outside the Swedish Riksdag (parliament). The banner reads 'School Strike for the Climate'.

But, for Thunberg, the school strikes are a sign of hope. She says: 'I think enough people have realised just how absurd the situation is. We are in the middle of the greatest crisis in human history and basically nothing is being done to prevent it. I think what we are seeing is the beginning of great changes and that is very hopeful' (cited in Watts 2019a). Many teachers and academics agree. A letter of support signed by 224 academics was published in one UK newspaper, while some teachers joined their students in the protests. In Belgium more than 3,000 scientists expressed approval for the action. Some politicians disapproved. The Australian prime minister, Scott Morrison, told parliament: 'We want more learning in schools and less activism in schools.'

A key demand of the students is that education systems must prioritize the teaching of climate change science and give environmental issues a central place in the curriculum. One London secondary school teacher is reported as saying: 'The current system teaches children to conform, not to question things. This conformity breeds the denial that is exacerbating the problems. What we need now is action.' Another said: 'Seeing young people abandon their studies for a day and claim to be taking their future into their own hands should make any teacher uneasy and it has led me to question my role as a secondary school science teacher' (cited in Watts 2019b).

The school climate strikes and positive responses of teachers and academics raise questions about education and education systems. What is education actually for and do we need formal schooling to deliver it? Should it primarily prepare children for work and other roles in society? Does education promote conformity? Should it foster critical thinking, even about the role of education itself? Is formal schooling important, or should students be taught that 'action' is more significant? In more sociological language, do education systems play a crucial role in cultural reproduction, including the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality?

While students in the Global North strike to protest about climate change, large numbers of children in other parts of the world do not attend school at all. In particular, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for around 52 per cent of all those in this category globally, with 22 per

cent of primary-age children not in school. Nigeria has the highest proportion of such children of any country in the world, with almost one in three primary-age (six- to eleven-year-olds) and one in four junior secondary-age children (twelveto fourteen-year-olds) not in formal schooling (UNICEF 2012: vi–xii). Yet, despite very different national contexts, the connection between education and social inequalities remains central in education systems right across the world.

Education is one of sociology's founding subjects, seen as crucial for the transmission of values and moral rules to new members of society. Emile Durkheim's first professorial post was as professor of education at the Sorbonne in Paris. As education is one of the oldest sociological subjects, there exists a huge body of research and scholarship on the topic. Clearly, we cannot hope to cover this vast body of work here, but the chapter offers an overview of some of the most important themes and recurring issues that have shaped the field.

We begin with that deceptively simple question raised by the activism of Greta Thunberg: what is education for? The answer is not straightforward. For instance, is 'education' the same thing as 'schooling'? Not surprisingly, there are several ways to answer such questions, and we look at some influential sociological theories. We then explore the links between social class, gender and ethnicity in education, while the final sections look at education and literacy levels around the world as well as the impact of digital technology in the classroom. The UK education system is used as a guide to social changes such as consumerism and demands for more parental choice. The chapter ends with digital developments in the delivery of higher education, which is now charged with meeting the demands of the global knowledge economy.

Theories of education and schooling

Education is widely seen as a human right that ought not to be denied as well as an obvious public good. Indeed, most people who have been through an education system and emerged literate, numerate and reasonably knowledgeable would probably agree that education has been beneficial for them. Yet there is a difference between education and schooling. Education can be defined as a *social institution* which enables and promotes the acquisition of skills and knowledge and the broadening of personal horizons. Education can take place in many social settings. Schooling, on the other hand, refers to the formal process through which certain types of skill and knowledge are delivered, normally through a pre-designed curriculum in specialized settings – schools. Schooling in most countries is typically divided into stages such as primary, secondary and higher, with the first two stages being mandatory for all up to a specified age.

Some sociologists see education as crucial for individuals to fulfil their potential, but they also recognize that education is not confined to or defined by what is delivered in schools. Mark Twain is reported to have said: 'I never let my schooling get in the way of my education' – the implication being that schools are not the best educators and may even be obstacles to useful learning, such as that gained from wise adults, within families or from personal experience. The school climate strikes are just one example of extra-curricular experience and learning. In this chapter we will deal with both education and schooling and, to reflect common usage, will often refer to the latter as taking place within organized 'education systems'.

The provision of education is a complex political, economic, social and cultural matter. Should education systems be paid for by the state through taxation and delivered free to all, or should we expect to pay directly for our own education? These are important *political and economic* decisions and matters of continuing public debate. What *kind* of education should be delivered and how? Should it cover politics, climate change or astrology, for example? Should we aim for the same basic education for all, regardless of inequalities of wealth, gender or

ethnicity, in comprehensive education systems? Or should the wealthy be allowed to buy their children's education outside the state system? Should schools be able to select pupils on the basis of ability? These *social* issues combine with the political and economic in increasingly complex arguments. Should education involve the compulsory teaching of a specific religion? Should faith-based schools be allowed and even encouraged? What kinds of values should underpin education systems? These *cultural* issues are of enormous political significance in multicultural societies.

Education has become an important site for a whole range of debates, which are not simply about what happens within schools. They are debates about the direction of society itself and how we can best equip young people for life in an increasingly global and digital age. Sociologists have been involved in debates about education ever since the work of Durkheim in the late nineteenth century, and this is where we begin our review of theories of education.

Education as socialization

Common values play a vital role in uniting a variety of social groups and a multitude of individuals. Emile Durkheim argued that these values are transmitted not only via family and peergroup interactions but through education and schooling, all of which can be seen as agents of socialization. Common values include religious and moral beliefs and a sense of self-discipline. Durkheim argues that schooling enables children to internalize social rules that contribute to the functioning of society. In late nineteenth-century France, he was particularly concerned with shared moral values, as he witnessed a creeping individualism which posed a threat to social solidarity. Schools, he maintained, could teach mutual responsibility and the value of the collective good. As a 'society in miniature', the school could also impart discipline and respect for authority.

But in the industrial societies, Durkheim wrote (2011 [1925]), education has another socialization function; it teaches the skills needed to perform roles in increasingly specialized occupations. In traditional societies, occupational skills could be learned within

families but, as the extended division of labour led to a more complex society, an education system was created to pass on the skills required to fill various specialized occupational roles.

Durkheim's functionalist approach to sociology was introduced in [chapter 1](#), 'What is Sociology?', and [chapter 3](#), 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Talcott Parsons outlined a different structural functionalist approach to education in mid-twentieth-century America. Unlike Durkheim, Parsons was not worried about increasing individualism, arguing instead that a central function of education was to instil the value of *individual* achievement. This was crucial to the functioning of industrialized societies, but it could not be learned in the [family](#). A child's status in the family is ascribed – fixed from birth. By contrast, a child's status in school is largely achieved, and, in schools, children are assessed according to universal standards through tests and exams. For Parsons, the main function of education is to enable children to move from the *particularistic* standards of the family to the *universal* standards of modern societies. According to Parsons, schools, like the wider society, operate on a meritocratic basis where children achieve their status according to merit or worth, rather than on the basis of their sex, race or class (Parsons and Bales 1956). As we shall see, the idea that schools are indeed meritocratic has been much criticized.

Functionalist theory tells us something significant about education systems. They do aim to provide individuals with the skills and knowledge needed to participate in societies, and schools do teach children some of the values and morals of the wider society. Yet functionalist theory also overstates the case for a single set of society-wide values. There are many cultural differences within a single society, and the notion of a set of central values that should be taught to all is not accurate. This highlights a recurring problem within functionalist

accounts, namely the concept of 'society' itself. Functionalists see education systems as serving several functions for society as a whole, but this assumes that society is relatively homogeneous and that all social groups share similar interests. But is this really true? Critics from the conflict tradition in sociology point out that, in societies marked by major social inequalities, education systems which support them must also reinforce those social inequalities. In that sense, schooling works in the interests of the more powerful or ruling groups.

Many schools celebrate individual achievement through rituals such as award ceremonies and presentations.

The importance of schools and peer relations in socialization is discussed further in [chapter 14](#), 'The Life Course'.

Schooling for capitalism?

Consensus theories (such as functionalism) and conflict theories are in agreement that schools are agents of socialization. But, in a highly influential study of education in the USA, Bowles and Gintis (1976) concluded that this means that schools produce particular kinds of workers for capitalist businesses. Their Marxist thesis argued that the close connection between the worlds of work and education was not just a matter of the school curriculum teaching knowledge and skills that employers need. In fact, the education system helps to shape entire personalities: 'Specifically, the social relationships of education – the relationships between administrators and teachers, teachers and students, students and students, and students and their work – replicate the hierarchical divisions of labor' (ibid.: 131).

This theory challenged the widespread idea at the time that education was 'a great leveller' which treats people equally and thus widens opportunities for all. Bowles and Gintis argued that education under capitalism was, in fact, a great divider which reproduces social inequality. They maintained that the structure of schooling is based on a 'correspondence principle' – that is, the structures of school life *correspond* to the structures of working life. In both school and work, conformity to rules is rewarded, teachers and managers dictate tasks, pupils and workers perform these tasks, school staff are organized hierarchically – as is company management – and this situation has to be accepted as inevitable.

In some ways this orthodox Marxist thesis represents a kind of 'conflict functionalism', which sees society as riven with conflict and the education system within it as performing important functions that help

to maintain inequality. Other Marxist critics saw the main flaw in the thesis as its correspondence principle, which was too simple and reductionist. For example, it relied on the social structure shaping and determining individuals and did not give enough significance to the possibility of active pupil and student resistance (Giroux 1983; Brown and Lauder 1997). Again, the recent climate change strikes show that there is scope for individual and group agency within the school system that may also be in opposition to aspects of it. The thesis is also overly generalized and was not developed from an empirical evidence base within schools. Later researchers found a diversity of practice in schools, and, in many cases, it may be possible for school heads and teachers to generate an ethos that encourages working-class pupils to be more ambitious than the theory allows for. After all, in many capitalist countries today, employers complain that schools are actually *failing* to produce workers with the skills and knowledge they require.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Many working-class children achieve a good number of qualifications at secondary school. How might Bowles and Gintis's thesis account for this fact? Given that developed countries have primarily service employment economies, do the structures of schooling still mirror the structures of work?

The hidden curriculum

An important finding from Bowles and Gintis's argument is that a hidden curriculum operates within education systems, through which pupils learn to accept discipline, hierarchy and passivity towards the status quo. One of the most controversial and interesting theorists of education to explore the hidden curriculum is the Austrian anarchist and philosopher Ivan Illich (1926–2002). Illich is noted for his staunch opposition to the culture of industrial capitalism, which deskilled the population, leaving people more reliant on the products of industry and less on their own creativity and knowledge. In the sphere of health, for example, traditional remedies and practices are lost as bureaucratic

health systems lead to a reliance on doctors and hospitals – a pattern that is repeated in all areas of life, including education.

Illich (1971) argued that the very notion of compulsory schooling should be questioned. According to Illich, schools have developed to supply four basic functions: the provision of custodial care, the distribution of people within occupational roles, the learning of dominant values, and the acquisition of socially approved skills and knowledge. Schools, like prisons, have become custodial organizations because attendance is compulsory, and young people are 'kept off the streets' between early childhood and their entry into work. Much is learned in school that has nothing to do with the formal content of lessons. By the nature of the discipline and regimentation they involve, schools inculcate what Illich called 'passive consumption' – an uncritical acceptance of the existing social order. The hidden curriculum teaches young people that their role in life is, 'to know their place and to sit still in it' (ibid.: 74).

A similar conclusion on the hidden curriculum was reached by John Taylor Gatto (2002), a retired schoolteacher with thirty years' experience. He argued that the hidden curriculum in the USA teaches seven basic lessons. The formal curriculum involves a fairly random mix of information on a variety of subjects, which produces *confusion* rather than genuine knowledge and understanding. Schools teach children to accept the status quo, to know their place within the *class hierarchy* and to defer to their betters. The class bell at the start and end of lessons teaches *indifference*; no lesson is ever so important that it can carry on after the bell. Students are taught to be both *emotionally dependent* and *intellectually dependent* on authority figures, namely teachers, who tell them what to think and even how to feel. They also learn that their own *self-esteem is provisional*, reliant on the opinion that officials have of them based on a battery of tests, report cards and grades. The final lesson is that being under *constant surveillance* is normal, evidenced by the culture of homework, which effectively transfers school discipline into the home. Gatto concluded that the compulsory state school system in the USA (and, by implication, in all similar systems) delivers 'compulsory subordination for all' and is 'structurally unreformable'. Instead, he argued for home education, where children can take control

of their own learning using parents and other adults as 'facilitators' rather than as teachers. Home schooling is certainly a rising trend, but it does little to tackle existing educational problems. Instead, Lubienski (2003) argues that it represents a privatized approach to schooling, which amplifies the advantages and disadvantages of students' socio-economic position.

Sport is part of the school curriculum, ostensibly to encourage healthy living. However, from a functionalist perspective, sport is also an important part of socialization, teaching children both competitiveness and how to work as part of a team.

Illich (1971) advocated the *deschooling of society*. Since schools do not promote equality or the development of individual creativity, why not do away with them altogether? Illich did not want to abolish all forms of educational organization but argued that everyone who wants to learn should be provided with access to available resources at any time in their lives, not just during childhood. Such a system should make it possible for knowledge to be widely diffused and shared rather than confined to specialists. Learners should not have to submit to a standard curriculum but should have personal choice over what they study.

In place of schools Illich suggested several types of educational framework. Material resources for formal learning would be stored in libraries, rental agencies, laboratories and information storage banks, accessible to anyone. 'Communications networks' would be set up, providing data about the skills possessed by different individuals and whether they would be willing to train others or engage in mutual learning activities. And students could be provided with vouchers, allowing them to use educational services as and when they wished.

Are these proposals unrealistic? Many think so. Yet if paid work is substantially reduced or restructured in the future and courses can be delivered remotely over the internet, perhaps relatively inexpensively or even free of charge, they may appear more realistic and perhaps even attractive. Education would not just be a form of early training within special institutions but would become available to whoever wished to take advantage of it. Illich's 1970s ideas became interesting again with the rise of digital technology and ideas of learning throughout the life course. We will return to these recent developments towards the end of this chapter.

Education and cultural reproduction

The sociology of education has repeatedly shown that education and inequality are closely related. In this section we review the various ways in which sociologists have attempted to account for inequalities within education systems. Basil Bernstein's classic study emphasizes the significance of language and language codes (see 'Classic studies'

), Paul Willis looks at the effects of cultural values in shaping attitudes to education and work, while Pierre Bourdieu examines the relationship between the cultures of school and home life. What all of these key works are concerned with is cultural reproduction – the generational transmission of cultural values, norms and experience and the mechanisms and processes through which this is achieved.

[Classic studies 16.1](#) Basil Bernstein on language and social class

The research problem

Working-class children generally do not do as well in school as their middle-class peers. This is a deceptive statement which demands a more detailed answer. *Why* do working-class children not do so well? Are they, on average, naturally less intelligent? Are they lacking the motivation to do well? Do they not get enough support from their parents? Alternatively, is there something about schools and schooling which prevents working-class children from succeeding in the formal education system?

Bernstein's explanation

The British sociologist Basil Bernstein (1924–2000) was interested in the connection between class inequality and education. Drawing on conflict theory, Bernstein (1975) examined the problem through an analysis of children's linguistic skills. He found that, during their early lives, children from varying backgrounds develop different *language codes* or forms of speech, which affect their subsequent school experience. But he was not concerned with differences in the size of vocabulary or verbal skills; rather, his interest was in systematic differences in ways of *using* language.

The speech of working-class children, Bernstein argued, represents a *restricted code* – a way of using language containing many unstated assumptions that speakers expect others to know. A [restricted code](#) is a type of speech tied to its cultural setting. Many working-class people live in strong familial or neighbourhood cultures in which values and norms are taken for granted and not explicitly expressed, and parents tend to socialize children directly using rewards or reprimands to shape behaviour. Language in a restricted code is more suitable for communication about practical experience than in discussions of abstract ideas, processes or relationships. Restricted-code speech is thus oriented to the norms

of the group without anyone being able to explain why they follow the patterns of behaviour they do.

The language development of middle-class children involves the acquisition of an [elaborated code](#) – a style of speaking in which the meanings of words can be individualized to suit the demands of particular situations. The ways in which children from middle-class backgrounds learn to use language are less bound to particular contexts and the child is able more easily to generalize and express abstract ideas. Thus middle-class parents, when controlling their children, frequently explain the reasons and principles that underlie their reactions to behaviour. While a working-class parent might tell a child off for wanting to eat too many sweets simply by saying, 'No more sweets for you!', a middle-class parent is more likely to explain that eating too many sweets is bad for their health and teeth.

Children who have acquired elaborated codes of speech are more able to deal with the demands of academic education systems than those with restricted codes. This does not imply that working-class children have an 'inferior' type of speech or that their code of language is 'deprived'. Rather, the way in which they use speech clashes with the academic culture of schools, which favours those who have mastered elaborated codes and thus fit more easily into the school environment.

Joan Tough (1976) found that working-class children had less experience of having their questions answered at home and were less able to ask questions in classroom situations, while a study by Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes (1984) came to similar conclusions. It is generally accepted that Bernstein's thesis has been a productive one (Morais et al. 2001), and his ideas help us to understand why those from certain socio-economic backgrounds underachieve in school. Working-class children find the classroom situation difficult to cope with, especially when middle-class children appear so comfortable with it. The majority of teachers are from middle-class backgrounds and their language use makes the elaborated code appear normal and the restricted code inferior. The child may attempt to cope with this by translating the teacher's language into something they are familiar with but may then fail to

grasp the principles the teacher intends to convey. And, while working-class children experience little difficulty with rote or 'drill' learning, they may have major difficulties grasping conceptual distinctions involving generalization and abstraction.

Critical points

Some critics of Bernstein's thesis argue that it is one of several 'deficit hypothesis' theories, all of which see working-class culture as lacking something essential (Boocock 1980; Bennett and LeCompte 1990). In this case the deficit is an elaborated language code which enables middle-class children to express themselves more fully. For these critics, Bernstein takes the middle-class code to be superior and the theory is therefore an elitist one. It is not just that those of working-class backgrounds *perceive* the higher social classes as somehow their betters – as in many theories of ideological dominance; in Bernstein's theory, the elaborate code is *objectively* superior to the restricted code. Critics have also claimed that the theory of language codes is not supported by enough empirical research to be accepted as it does not tell us enough about the reality of life inside schools.

Contemporary significance

Bernstein's theory of language codes has been enormously influential in the sociology of education, and many studies have been conducted which draw heavily on his methods (Jenkins 1990). Some have taken his ideas into new areas such as gender and pedagogy, and his reputation as an educational theorist has spread internationally (Sadovnik 1995; Arnot 2001). Bernstein's work successfully linked language and speech with education systems and wider power relations in society as a whole. Rejecting the charge of elitism, he said that his thesis 'draws attention to the relations between macro power relations and micro practices of transmission, acquisition and evaluation and the positioning and oppositioning to which these practices give rise' (Bernstein 1990: 118–19). Understanding these relations better, he hoped to find ways of preventing the wastage of working-class children's abilities.

Learning to labour – by failing in school?

What we may take away from the discussion so far is that the theoretical ideas set out by various theorists would benefit greatly by more empirical studies of school life as it is actually lived by children (and school staff). Paul Willis's (1977) research in a school in Birmingham, UK, is over forty years old, but it remains a classic study of investigative sociology. The research question Willis asked was how cultural reproduction actually operated – or, as he succinctly put it, 'how working-class kids get working-class jobs'. It is often thought that, during the process of schooling, many young people from working-class or ethnic minority backgrounds come to recognize that they are just not 'clever' enough to get highly paid or high-status jobs. This experience of academic failure teaches them to acknowledge their individual limitations, and, having accepted this, they move into jobs with more limited prospects.

Willis was not convinced. He pointed out that this interpretation does not conform at all to the reality of people's lives and experience. The 'street wisdom' of those from poor neighbourhoods may be irrelevant to academic success, but it does involve a set of abilities just as subtle, skilful and complex as any intellectual skills taught in school. Few, if any, young people leave school thinking, 'I'm so stupid it's fair and proper for me to be stacking boxes in a factory all day.' So, if children from less privileged backgrounds accept manual jobs *without* feeling themselves to be failures, then other factors must be involved.

Willis looked at a particular group of boys in the Birmingham school, spending a lot of time with them. Members of the gang, who called themselves 'the lads', were white, though the school also contained many young people from West Indian and Asian backgrounds. Willis found that the lads had an acute and perceptive understanding of the school's authority system but used this knowledge to fight against it. They saw the school as an alien environment but one they could manipulate to their own ends. They derived positive pleasure from the constant conflict and minor skirmishes they carried on with teachers and were adept at seeing the weak points of the teachers' claims to authority, as well as where they were vulnerable as individuals.

In classrooms, for instance, young people were expected to sit still, be quiet and get on with their work. But the lads were forever on the move, except when the teacher's stare might freeze them momentarily. They would gossip surreptitiously or pass open remarks that were on the verge of direct insubordination but could always be explained away if challenged. The lads recognized that future work would be much like school, but they actively looked forward to it. They expected no direct satisfaction from work but were impatient for wages. Far from taking jobs – in tyre-fitting, carpet-laying, plumbing or decorating – from feelings of inferiority, they held an attitude of 'dismissive superiority' towards work, just as they had towards school. They enjoyed the adult status that came from working but were not interested in 'making a career'. As Willis points out, work in blue-collar settings often involves similar features to those the lads actually created in their counter-school culture – banter, quick wit and the skill to subvert the demands of authority figures.

In this way, Willis shows that the lads' subculture, created in an active process of engagement with school norms and disciplinary mechanisms, mirrors the shop-floor culture of the work they expect to move into. Only later in life might they come to see themselves as trapped in arduous, unrewarding labour. By the time they have families they may look back on education and see it – hopelessly – as having been the only escape route. Yet, if they try to pass this assessment on to their children, they are likely to have no more success than their own parents did. Willis's study succeeds in demonstrating the process of cultural reproduction and the way inequalities are linked to education and schooling. It shows that educational research can be both empirical and, at the same time, theoretically informed. However, its focus is explicitly on the educational experiences of white working-class boys, and it is not possible to generalize from this to the experience of other social classes, girls or minority ethnic groups.

Education, cultural capital and the formation of 'habitus'

Among theorists of cultural reproduction, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002) holds a special place, with, arguably, the most systematic general theory to date. Bourdieu (1986, 1988; Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) devised a broad theory connecting economic position, social status and symbolic capital with cultural knowledge and skills. Education is a central element of this perspective, but it is necessary to outline Bourdieu's theory of forms of capital in order to grasp its significance for educational sociology.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

16.1 Learning *not* to labour

Twenty years after Willis studied 'the lads' in Birmingham, Máirtín Mac an Ghaill (1994) investigated the experiences of young working-class men at the Parnell School, also in the West Midlands. He was interested in how male students develop specific forms of masculinity as part of their passage into manhood. Unlike Willis's lads, these boys were growing up with high unemployment, the collapse of the manufacturing base in the region, and cutbacks in welfare benefits for young people.

Mac an Ghaill found that the transition to adulthood was more fragmented than that experienced by Willis's lads in the 1970s. There was no longer a clear trajectory from school into waged labour. Many of the boys saw the post-school years as characterized by dependency (on family in particular), 'useless' government training schemes, and an insecure labour market unfavourable to young manual workers. There was widespread confusion as to how education was relevant to their futures, which manifested itself in very different responses. While some of the male peer groups tried to chart upwardly mobile paths for themselves as academic achievers or 'new enterprisers', others were openly hostile to schooling.

Of the four school peer groups Mac an Ghaill identified, the 'macho lads' were the most traditionally working class. The macho lads coalesced as a group by the time they became teenagers, and members were in the bottom two academic 'sets' for all subjects. Their attitudes towards education were openly hostile and they shared a view that school was part of an authoritarian system that placed meaningless study demands on captive students. Where Willis's 'lads' had found ways to manipulate the school environment to their advantage, the macho lads were defiant about their role within it.

The macho lads were seen by the school administration as the most dangerous anti-school peer group at Parnell School. Teachers were encouraged to deal with them using overtly authoritarian means, and the lads' symbolic displays of working-class masculinity – such as certain clothing, hairstyles and earrings – were banned. Teachers were involved in the 'surveillance' of students, constantly monitoring them in hallways, instructing them to 'look at me when I'm talking to you' and telling them to 'walk properly down the corridor'.

Secondary school for the macho lads was an 'apprenticeship' in learning to be tough. School was not about the 3 Rs (reading, writing and arithmetic), but about the 3 Fs (fighting, fucking and football). 'Looking after your mates' and 'sticking together' were key values, and school became a contested territory, just like the streets. The macho lads regarded teachers in the same way as law enforcement – with open disdain – believing they were the main source of conflict within the school. They refused to accept teachers' authority and were convinced they were constantly being 'set up' to be punished, disciplined or humiliated.

Like Willis's 'lads', the macho lads associated academic work and achievement with being inferior and effeminate. Students who excelled were 'dickhead achievers' and schoolwork was rejected as inappropriate for real men. As one macho lad, Leon, commented: 'The work you do here is girls' work. It's not real work. It's just for kids. They [the teachers] try to make you write down things about how you feel. It's none of their fucking business' (Mac an Ghaill 1994: 59).

Mac an Ghaill's study shows how the 'macho lads' were undergoing a particular 'crisis of masculinity'. This is because they were actively developing an 'outdated' working-class masculinity centred on manual waged labour at a time when secure manual labour had all but disappeared. They continued to fantasize about a 'full-employment' society which their fathers and uncles had inhabited. Despite appearing hypermasculine and defensive, in fact they were grounded in a working-class worldview inherited from previous generations.

The changing forms of masculinity are discussed in [chapter 7](#), 'Gender and Sexuality'.

THINKING CRITICALLY

From your own school experience, do you recognize the 'macho lads' culture? Is there a culture in relation to girls with similar attitudes and behaviour? How would you characterize the behaviour of groups of girls who find school life irrelevant?

The central concept in Bourdieu's theory is *capital*, which he takes from Marx's ideas on capitalism. Marx saw ownership of the [means of production](#) as the crucial division in society, conferring many advantages on capitalists. But, for Bourdieu, this [economic capital](#) is just one of several forms which individuals and social groups can use to gain advantages. Bourdieu identifies social capital, cultural capital and symbolic capital in addition to economic capital. [Social capital](#) refers to membership of and involvement in elite social networks or moving within social groups which are well connected and influential. [Cultural capital](#) is that gained within the family environment and through education, leading to increased knowledge and skills, along with qualifications such as degrees and other credentials. [Symbolic capital](#) refers to the prestige, status and other forms of social honour which enable those with high status to dominate those with lower status.

The important aspect of this scheme is that forms of capital can be exchanged. For example, those with high *cultural capital* may be able to trade it for *economic capital*. During interviews for well-paid jobs, their superior knowledge and credentials, gained mainly during schooling, can give them an advantage over other applicants. Similarly, those with high *social capital* may 'know the right people' or 'move in the right social circles' and be able effectively to exchange this *social capital* for

symbolic capital – respect from others and increased social status – which increases their power chances in dealings with other people.

Bourdieu's second concept is that of the <u>field</u> – various social sites or arenas where competitive struggles take place. It is through fields that social life is organized and power relationships operate, with each field having its own 'rules of the game' that may not be transferred to other fields. For example, in art and aesthetics, cultural capital is most highly prized, and those who are able to converse knowledgeably about the history of art or music become powerful within the field – hence the power of critics in literature or cinema to make or break a book or film with their reviews. But these criteria do not apply in the field of production, where economic capital holds sway.

Finally, Bourdieu uses the concept of <u>habitus</u>, which can be described as the learned dispositions – such as bodily comportment, ways of speaking or ways of thinking and acting – that are adopted by people in relation to their social conditions. Aspects of habitus would include Bernstein's language codes and Mac an Ghaill's macho boys' displays of working-class masculinity. The concept of habitus is important as it allows us to analyse the links between social structures and individual actions and personalities.

But what has all of this to do with education? Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital is at the heart of the matter, and he identifies three forms in which it can exist. Cultural capital can exist in an *embodied state* – that is, we carry it around with us in our ways of thinking, speaking and bodily movement. It can also exist in an *objectified state* – for example, in the material possession of works of art, books or clothes. Finally, cultural capital is found in *institutionalized forms*, such as those held in educational qualifications, which are nationally accepted and easily translated into economic capital in the labour market. It is easy to see how the embodied and institutionalized forms are acquired through education, forming resources to be used in the specific fields of social life. In this way, education can be a rich source of cultural capital which potentially benefits many people.

As Bernstein, Willis and Mac an Ghaill all saw, the education system itself is *not* just a neutral field divorced from the wider society. Rather,

the culture and standards within the education system reflect that society, and, in doing so, schools systematically advantage those who have already acquired cultural capital in the family and through the social networks in which they are embedded (a crucial form of social capital). Middle-class children fit into the culture of schools with ease; they speak in similar ways to teachers, they have the right manners and they do better when it comes to exams. But because the education system is portrayed and widely perceived as being open to all on the basis of talent, many working-class children come to see themselves as intellectually inferior and accept that they, rather than the system itself, are to blame for their failure. In this way, the education system plays a key role in the cultural reproduction of social inequalities.

Acquiring cultural capital

In an ethnographic study of twelve diverse families in the USA, Lareau (2003) used Bourdieu's ideas, particularly the concept of cultural capital, to conduct an 'intensive "naturalistic" observation' of parenting styles across social classes. In the working-class and poorer families, parents did not try to reason with children but simply told them what to do and what not to do. Children were also expected to find their own forms of recreation and not to rely on parents to create it for them. Working-class children did not talk back and accepted that the family's financial situation imposed limits on their own aspirations. Working-class parents perceived a clear difference between adults and children and did not see a need to engage with their children's feelings and opinions, preferring to facilitate a 'natural growth'. This parenting style, says Lareau, is 'out of synch' with the current standards of social institutions, though working-class parents and children still come into contact with these. Hence, children begin to develop a growing sense of 'distance, distrust and constraint'.

On the other hand, middle-class children in the study were talkative, good at conversation and adept at social mores such as shaking hands and making eye contact when talking. They were also very good at getting other family members, especially parents, to serve their needs and were comfortable with adults and authority figures. Lareau argues that middle-class parents are constantly interested and involved in

their children's feelings and opinions and jointly organize their leisure activities, rather than leaving them to make their own. Continual discussion between parents and children marks out the middle-class parenting style, which is based on a *concerted cultivation of the child*. The result is that the middle-class children had a clear sense of personal entitlement rather than feeling distant and constrained. Lareau's study shows us some of the practical ways in which cultural capital is passed on across generations and how styles of parenting are strongly linked to social class.

Lareau notes that both parenting methods have their advantages, but some of the middle-class families she studied were exhausted by constant efforts to fulfil their children's demands, while the children were more anxious and stressed than the working-class children, whose family ties were closer and who experienced much less sibling rivalry. Lareau's conclusion is that parenting methods tend to vary much more by social class than by ethnicity and that, as we have seen, the middle-class children in the study were much better prepared for success at school than those children from working-class families.

One practical way that middle-class children maintain their advantage in schooling is through the management of their interactions with teachers and staff. Calarco's (2018) ethnographic study of one school in the USA –Maplewood – observed interactions between children and teachers in classroom situations. She argues that middle-class children often prompt parents to intervene to secure advantages for them in school, but the children also actively intervened themselves, requesting or demanding assistance from teachers.

Of course, working-class children requested assistance too, though they tend to have been taught by their parents to deal with school issues themselves and not to expect teachers to give them special treatment. The middle-class children had no such reservations. They had been taught that teachers are there to help them to succeed. As a result, 'middle-class students asked, asked loudly, and kept asking until they got the support they desired' (Calarco 2018: 9). Although many studies have reported on working-class children's resistance to school authorities, this research shows that middle-class children are much

more successful in challenging the authority of teachers in the classroom and avoiding being labelled as 'disruptive'.

Calarco argues that this kind of 'negotiated advantage' went beyond what was fair or was required of teachers, and middle-class children's requests were rarely refused, even when teachers recognized their assistance conferred specific advantage. The outcome was that the most advantaged group typically received more assistance and support than any other. Sociological studies have long reported that middle-class parents are able to use their cultural capital to provide their children with educational advantage. Yet this study shows that children are themselves active agents in schools, with middle-class children intervening in very direct ways to maintain and increase their social class advantage.

Bourdieu's work has stimulated many studies into education, inequality and processes of cultural reproduction. However, it has not been adopted without criticism. One issue is that it appears almost impossible for the working classes to succeed in a middle-class education system. But, of course, a fair number actually do so. In an age of mass higher education, many more working-class people are entering universities and acquiring the kinds of institutionalized cultural capital that enables them to compete with the middle classes.

Also, we should not mistake the resigned acceptance of their situation by working-class children with a positive legitimation of schools and their outcomes. After all, there is ample evidence of resistance and rebellion among working-class pupils through truancy, bad behaviour in classrooms and the formation of school gangs, which generate alternative standards of success. Nevertheless, Bourdieu's theoretical framework remains the most systematic synthesis yet produced for understanding the role of schooling in the reproduction of social inequality.

Bourdieu's views on class and social capital are discussed in more detail in , 'Stratification and Social Class'.

Reproducing gender divisions

Research in the sociology of education was notably focused on boys until around the early 1970s, so that sociologists knew very little about the ways that girls experienced their school life (Gilligan 1982; Griffin 1985). This was not unique as most other sociological subjects lacked a distinctive female focus. Sociologists working from a feminist theoretical perspective changed this situation, exploring the socialization of girls into feminine norms during their school careers alongside a series of studies which established that schools systematically disadvantaged girls from across social class groupings.

McRobbie (1991) and Lees (1993) argued that schooling in the UK helped to reproduce 'appropriate' feminine norms among girls. Schools saw their task as preparing girls for family life and responsibilities and boys for future employment, thus reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes within the wider society (Deem 1980). Stanworth (1983) studied the classroom experiences of a mixed group of children in a comprehensive school and discovered that, although comprehensives were intended to provide equal opportunities, girls tended to receive less attention from teachers than did boys. She concluded that this differential teaching pattern undermined the girls' confidence in their own abilities and contributed to their underachievement. This was a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which teachers' initial expectations (boys will do better than girls) shaped their behaviour towards the pupils, which then brought about the outcome they (perhaps wrongly) assumed at the start.

The culture of schools has also been found to be permeated with a general heterosexual sexism, particularly in the playground, corridors

and other spaces outside the classroom (Wood 1984). As Willis (1977) found, boys routinely use sexist language and refer to girls using derogatory terms. This creates an atmosphere of aggressive masculinity that degrades girls and women while corralling boys' acceptable identities into a very narrow, masculine range. Renold (2005) argues that 'heterosexualization' is evident as early as primary school, pushing children to invest in and develop a heterosexual identity if they are to be considered a 'proper' boy or girl.

One consequence is that homosexuality is made invisible and lesbian and gay young people find that the school environment does not allow them openly to express their emerging identities. If they do, they run the risk of teasing, harassment and bullying (Burbridge and Walters 1981; see chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', for a wider discussion of sexuality). Ringrose and Renold (2010) suggest that the process of adopting a heterosexual identity demands a series of 'normative cruelties', including performing as a tough, violent boy or a 'mean girl', that are, unlike overt physical bullying, taken for granted as simply part of school life.

Feminist scholars also investigated the *content* of the school curriculum. The Australian sociologist Dale Spender (1982) reported that many subjects were thoroughly imbued with an unwitting sexism, which made them unattractive to girls. Science texts, for example, routinely ignored the achievements of female scientists, making them invisible to students. In this way, science offered girls no positive role models and fails to engage them with the subject. Sue Sharpe (1994) saw schools steering girls' choices towards more 'feminine' subjects such as health studies and the arts and away from the more 'masculine' ones such as mathematics and ICT (information and communication technologies).

Nonetheless, as we will see later, over recent years there has been a significant change in this traditional pattern of disadvantage and exclusion, one of the most striking being the way that girls and young women now outperform boys and young men in almost every subject area and at every level of education. This shift has led to new debates on the problems boys face amid an apparent 'crisis of masculinity' (Connell 2005).

Summary

Two significant aspects of education have emerged from the sociological theories we have reviewed. On the one hand, a good quality education is something that can change people's lives for the better, and in many parts of the world families are desperate for their children to go to school as the route to a better life. Education is highly sought after and has often had to be fought for against opposition. Yet sociological research consistently finds that education systems not only create new opportunities but are also experienced differently by a range of social groups. Education systems are part of the societies within which they are embedded, and, when society is riven with inequalities, schools help to reproduce them, even against the best intentions of teachers, parents and children.

As the work of Bernstein, Willis and Bourdieu (among others) demonstrate, cultural reproduction in unequal societies leads to recurring patterns of educational inequality, giving the lie to longstanding ideas that education can 'level up' and compensate for wider social disadvantage. Reay (2017: 26) puts this very well, arguing that 'Education cannot compensate for society because our educational system was never set up to do that, any more than it was established to realise working-class educational potential. Instead, it operates as an enormous academic sieve, sorting out the educational winners from the losers in a crude and often brutal process that prioritises and rewards upper- and middle-class qualities and resources.' The next main section looks at the patterns of 'winners and losers' and how far these have changed over recent decades.

[Social divisions in education](#)

Without being explicitly titled as such, the majority of our discussion of education and inequality so far has focused on social class. The reason for this is that a large number of empirical studies over a very long period have consistently reported a clear connection between social class and educational attainment. In very blunt terms, probably the best established finding in the sociology of education is that, at all levels of the education system, children at the lower end of the socio-economic scale do less well and get fewer qualifications than those at the upper end.

Typical of this body of work is a UK study which used a measure of socio-economic position constructed from parental income, social class, housing tenure and self-reported financial difficulties in order to examine differential educational achievement up to the age of sixteen. The study found that class-based differences in cognitive ability were already large in infants of just three years old and had widened significantly at the age of five (Goodman and Gregg 2010: 5–6). The gap continued to widen through the primary school years ([figure 16.1](#)). By the time children reached secondary school, the achievement gap seems to have become embedded, with the result that only 21 per cent of the poorest fifth (or quintile) of children gained five A to C grades at age sixteen compared with 75 per cent of the top fifth ([figure 16.2](#)). This represents a gap between the highest and lowest socio-economic classes of an enormous 54 percentage points.
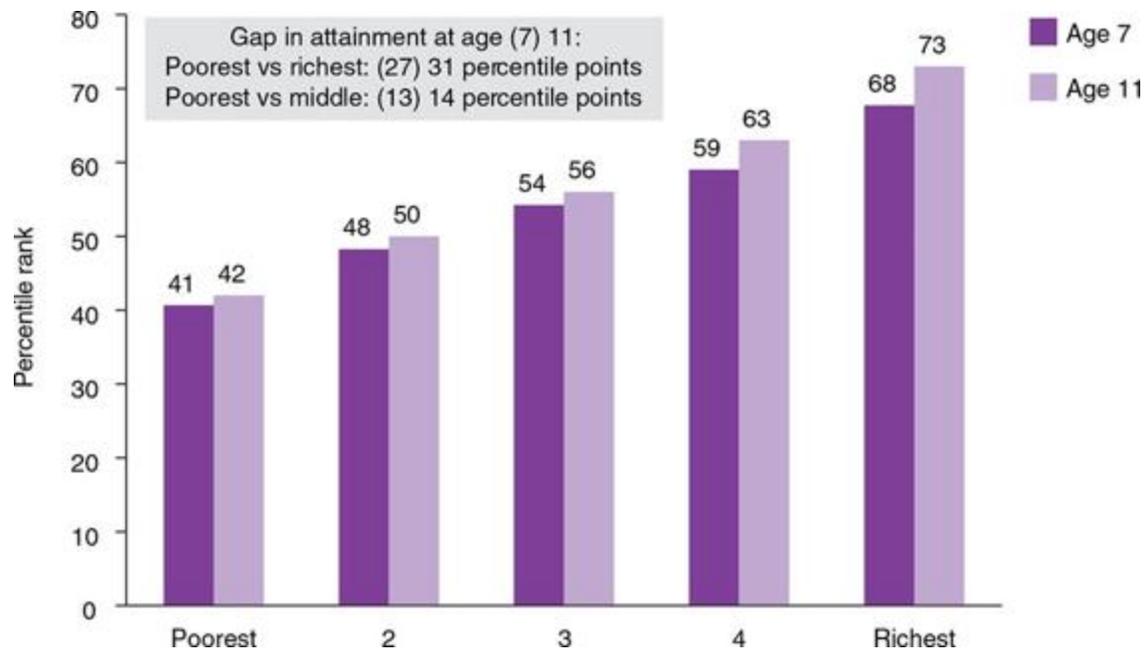
Figure 16.1 Average test score rank, by socio-economic position quintile at age seven and eleven

Source: Gregg and Washbrook (2010: 27).
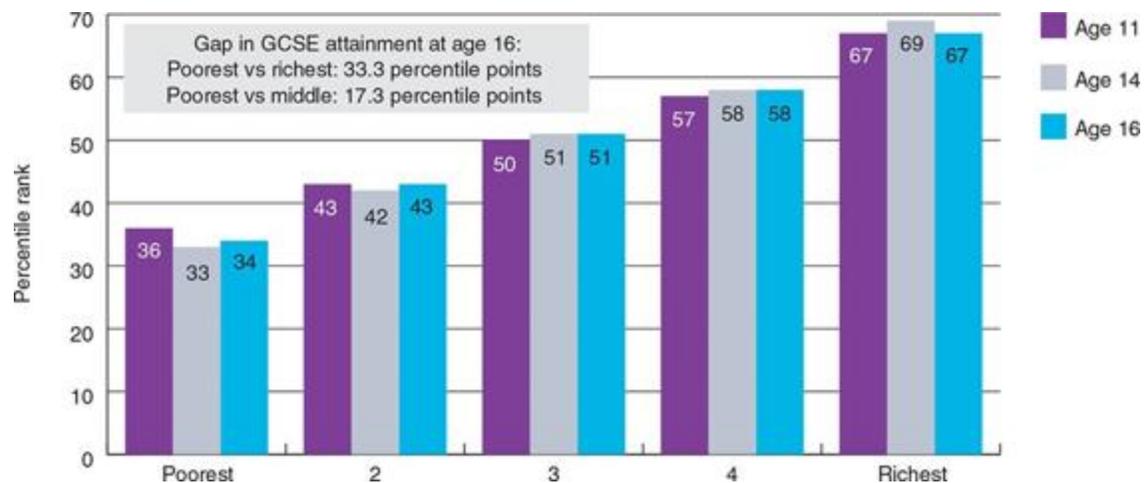
Figure 16.2 Key Stage test scores at ages eleven, fourteen and sixteen by socio-economic quintile

Source: Chowdry et al. (2010: 35).

The authors note that children from poorer backgrounds experience worse health and well-being, less advantageous home 'learning environments', fewer parent–child interactions, such as reading together, and less 'mother–child closeness' than those from better-off

backgrounds. They also point to differing attitudes towards the value of education and divergent educational aspirations. In short, like many others, this study finds that social class position at birth has wide-ranging consequences for children's educational opportunities and life chances. In Bourdieu's terms, findings such as these illustrate how the intergenerational transmission of cultural (and economic) capital continues to structure educational attainment in the twenty-first century.

A changing gendered pattern

In the developed countries, education provision and formal curricula were differentiated according to gender until late into the twentieth century. For example, in late nineteenth-century Britain, girls were taught skills to prepare them for domestic life, while boys took basic mathematics and were expected to gain skills that were required for work. Women's entry into higher education was similarly gradual, and they were not able to gain degree-level qualifications until 1878. Even so, the number of women studying for degrees remained very low – a situation that began to change significantly only in the 1960s and 1970s. However, this state of affairs has now been utterly transformed.

Today, the secondary-school curriculum no longer distinguishes explicitly between boys and girls in any systematic way, though there are various other 'points of entry' for the creation of gender differences in education. These include teacher expectations, school rituals and other aspects of the hidden curriculum. Although rules are rapidly loosening, regulations which compel girls to wear dresses or skirts in school are one of the more obvious ways in which gender-typing occurs. As a result of such compulsory dress policies, girls lack the freedom to sit casually, join in rough-and-tumble games or to run as fast as they are able.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

16.2 The British public schools

The public schools in Britain are an oddity in more ways than one. They are not 'public' at all, but private, fee-paying institutions. The degree of independence they have from the rest of the education system and the key role they play in the society at large marks them out from schools in other countries. There are some private schools, often linked to religions, in Western societies, but nowhere are private schools as exclusive or important as in the UK.

The public schools are nominally subject to state supervision, but, in reality, few major pieces of educational legislation have affected them. They were left untouched by the 1944 Act, as they were by the setting up of the comprehensive schools, and until quite recently the large majority were still single-sex institutions. There are about 2,300 fee-paying schools in England, educating some 6 per cent of the population. They include a diversity of different organizations, from prestigious establishments such as Eton, Rugby or Charterhouse through to so-called minor public schools whose names would be unknown to most people.

The term 'public school' is limited by some educationalists to a group of the major fee-paying schools. Among these are those that are members of the Headmasters' Conference (HMC), originally formed in 1871. Initially there were just fifty schools in the conference, but the number has expanded to more than 240 today. Individuals who have attended HMC schools still tend to dominate the higher positions in British society. A study by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission (2014: 10) found that those who attended fee-paying schools made up 71 per cent of senior judges, 62 per cent of senior armed forces officers, 55 per cent of the most senior civil servants, 50 per cent of the House of Lords, 36 per cent of the cabinet and 53 per cent of senior diplomats. The Conservative prime minister at the time, David Cameron, went to Eton College,

and his deputy in 2014, Nick Clegg, studied at Westminster School: both schools are members of HMC. The commission noted that the survey had found 'elitism so stark that it could be called "Social Engineering"'.

Boys at Eton College in their very traditional school uniform

School textbooks also perpetuate gendered images. Until very recently, it was common for storybooks in primary schools to portray boys as showing initiative and independence, while girls, if they appeared at all, were far more passive. Stories written especially for girls often have an element of adventure, but this usually takes the form of intrigues or mysteries in domestic or school settings. Boys' adventure stories are more wide-ranging, have heroes who travel to distant places or who are sturdily independent in other ways. At the secondary level, females have tended to be 'invisible' in most science and maths textbooks, suggesting that these are really 'male subjects'.

Gender differences in education are also clear in subject choice, and the idea that some subjects are more suited to boys or to girls remains common. Becky Francis (2000) argued that girls are more likely to be encouraged into less academically prestigious subjects than boys, and there is certainly a marked difference in the subjects they choose to pursue, especially at the higher levels. In 2016, over 90 per cent of UK students entered for an A-level or equivalent examination (standard university entry qualification) in computing were male, as were almost 80 per cent of those taking physics and science subjects (with the exception of biology). Conversely, an overwhelming majority of those choosing the expressive and performing arts, psychology, sociology and art and design were female ([figure 16.3](#)).

Although over the past two decades the British government and business organizations have encouraged young women to take STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics), the stark gender gap at A-level remains. A similarly gendered pattern was found in 2016 across the 19.6 million students in the twenty-eight countries

of the European Union, where engineering, science and computing graduates were predominantly male, while women formed the majority in social sciences, health and welfare and the humanities ([figure 16.4](#)). Nonetheless, as we will see, the actual achievement of girls and women in education systems around the world has now surpassed that of boys and at all levels.

Gender and achievement

Throughout the twentieth century, girls tended to outperform boys in terms of school results until they reached the middle years of secondary education. They then began to fall behind and, by the age of sixteen to eighteen as well as at university, boys did consistently better. In the UK until the late 1980s, girls were less likely than boys to attain the three A-levels necessary for admission to university and were entering higher education in smaller numbers than boys. Concerned about these unequal outcomes, feminist researchers undertook a number of important studies looking at the ways in which gender influences the learning process. They found that school curricula were often male-dominated and teachers devoted more attention to boys than girls in lessons.
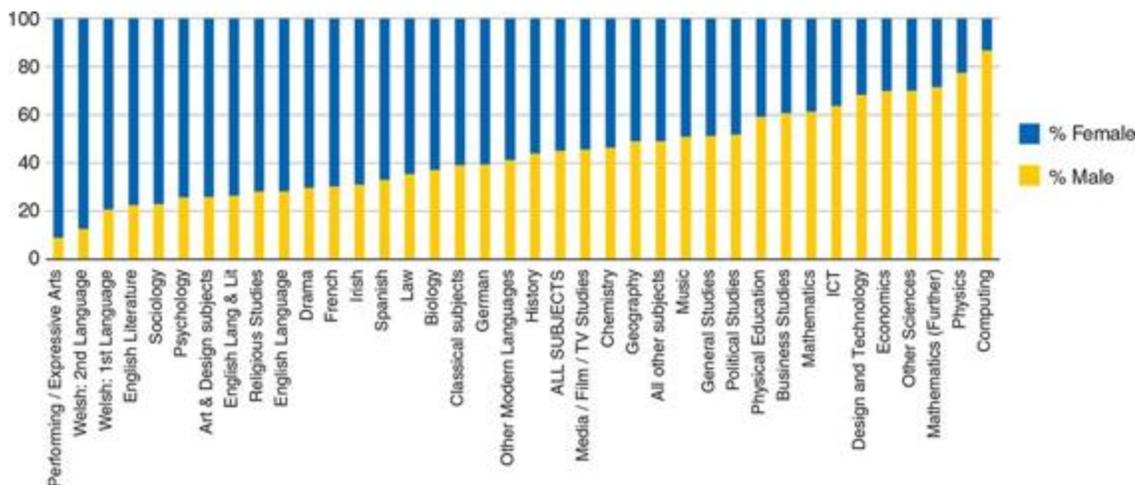
Figure 16.3 Differences between male and female A-level subject choices, 2019

Source: Joint Council for Qualifications (2019).
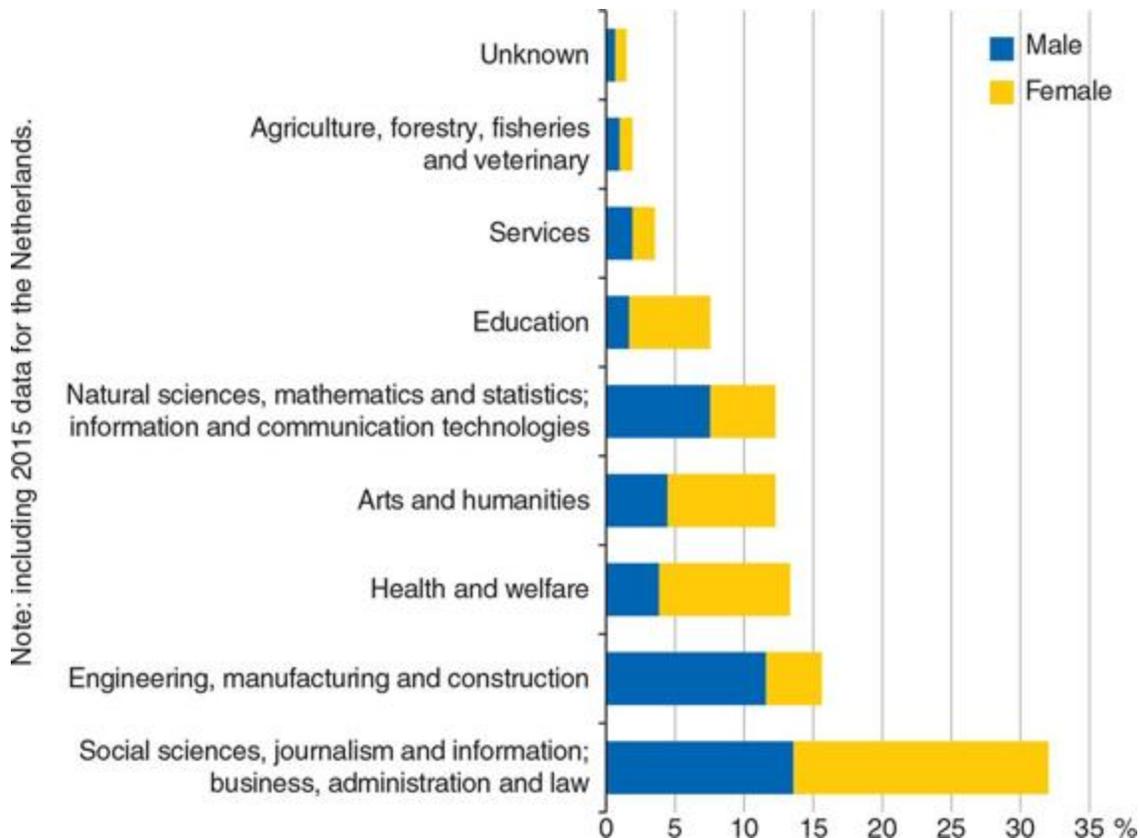
Figure 16.4 Students in tertiary education, by field of education and gender (EU-28), 2016

Source: Eurostat (2018a).

Since the 1990s, the debate on gender in schools has undergone a dramatic and unexpected reversal. 'Underachieving boys' became one of the main concerns of educators and policy-makers as girls began to outperform boys in all subject areas, including science and mathematics, and at all levels of education. Figure 16.5 clearly shows the gender gap for pupils in England in the early (foundation) years of schooling – that is, up to the age of five. Although 77.5 per cent of girls achieved the expected level in all early learning goals, only 63.2 per cent of boys did so. The largest gender gaps were in writing (12.8 percentage points – ppts), reading (10.5 ppts) and exploring and using media and materials (10.1 ppts). The smallest gap was in technology (2.9 ppts).

However, although the performance of boys and girls increased between 2013 and 2018, that of boys was increasing at a faster rate;

hence there is some evidence that the gender gap has begun to narrow over recent years (DfE 2018a: 6–8). In English schools, the average performance of girls at age sixteen (GCSE or 'Attainment 8') was above the overall average, while for boys it was below average. This gendered pattern was consistent across every ethnic category, as the average Attainment 8 score was higher for girls than boys (Race Disparity Unit 2019). Similar gendered performance data have been reported in other European countries, the USA and, indeed, most of the industrialized countries.

Female Male

	Gap
1. Listening and attention	9.0 ppt gap
2: Understanding	8.0 ppt gap
3: Speaking	8.5 ppt gap
4: Moving and handling	8.9 ppt gap
5: Health and self-care	6.3 ppt gap
6: Self-confidence and self-awareness	7.2 ppt gap
7: Managing feelings and behaviour	9.5 ppt gap
8: Making relationships	8.1 ppt gap
9: Reading	10.5 ppt gap
10: Writing	12.8 ppt gap
11: Numbers	7.2 ppt gap
12: Shape, space and measures	7.3 ppt gap
13: People and communities	8.3 ppt gap
14: The World	7.2 ppt gap
15: Technology	2.9 ppt gap
16: Exploring and using media and materials	10.1 ppt gap
17: Being imaginative	9.5 ppt gap

Figure 16.5 Percentage of children in England achieving the expected level in each of the early learning goals, by gender, 2018

Source: DfE (2018a: 7).

The problem of 'failing boys', which Keddie and Mills (2007) termed 'the boy turn' in policy discourses, is seen as linked to social problems such as crime, unemployment and drug abuse. In combination, these factors are said to have led to a 'crisis of masculinity' (discussed in chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality'). Boys who leave school early or with poor educational results are less likely to find good jobs and create stable families, because, in the post-industrial economies of the

developed world, fewer unskilled manual jobs are available for young men without a solid education and necessary qualifications.

Explaining the gender gap

Why do boys now do less well than girls in education systems? One significant factor is the influence of women's movements on the self-esteem and expectations of girls and young women. Girls and young women now grow up surrounded by many examples of women working outside the home, and exposure to these positive role models increases awareness of their own opportunities, challenging traditional stereotypes of women as housewives. Teachers and educationalists have also become more aware of gender discrimination. Many schools have taken steps to avoid gender stereotyping in the classroom, encouraging girls to explore traditionally 'male' subjects and promoting educational materials that are free of gender bias.

Some theories of the gender gap centre on the difference in learning styles between boys and girls. Girls are often regarded as more effectively organized and motivated than boys, and they mature earlier. One manifestation of this is that girls tend to relate to one another by talking and using their verbal skills. Boys, on the other hand, tend to socialize in a more active manner through sport, computer games, or just hanging out in the playground and streets and tend to be more disruptive in the classroom. These broad patterns of behaviour may be reaffirmed by teachers, who then hold lower expectations for boys than for girls.

Girls outperform boys at every level of education, and in most subjects. Is this a social problem?

Other scholars question the attention and resources being directed at underachieving boys, which amounts to something of a [moral panic](#), ignoring the fact that, beyond school, 'maleness' still confers significant economic and cultural advantages that are denied to women (Keddie and Mills 2007). The gender gap in language skills is actually longstanding and has been found the world over, but differences that used to be ascribed to boys' 'healthy idleness' now provoke controversy and frantic attempts to improve boys' results. As national performance targets, league tables and international literacy comparisons proliferate, thus bringing differences out into the open, 'equal outcomes' in education have become a top priority.

Yet the focus on boys, critics argue, serves to hide other forms of inequality within education. Although girls have forged ahead in many areas, they are still less likely than boys to choose subjects that lead to careers in science, technology, engineering or mathematics. Boys pull ahead in science by about the age of eleven and continue to outperform girls through to university. They still dominate in subjects such as

chemistry and computer science. So women may be entering higher education in greater numbers, but they continue to be disadvantaged in the job market in comparison with men holding the same level of qualification (Epstein 1998). Concentrating on 'failing boys' is therefore misleading, since men continue to dominate the positions of power in society, and it may be that the underachievement of working-class boys has less to do with gender and is more closely allied to social class position.
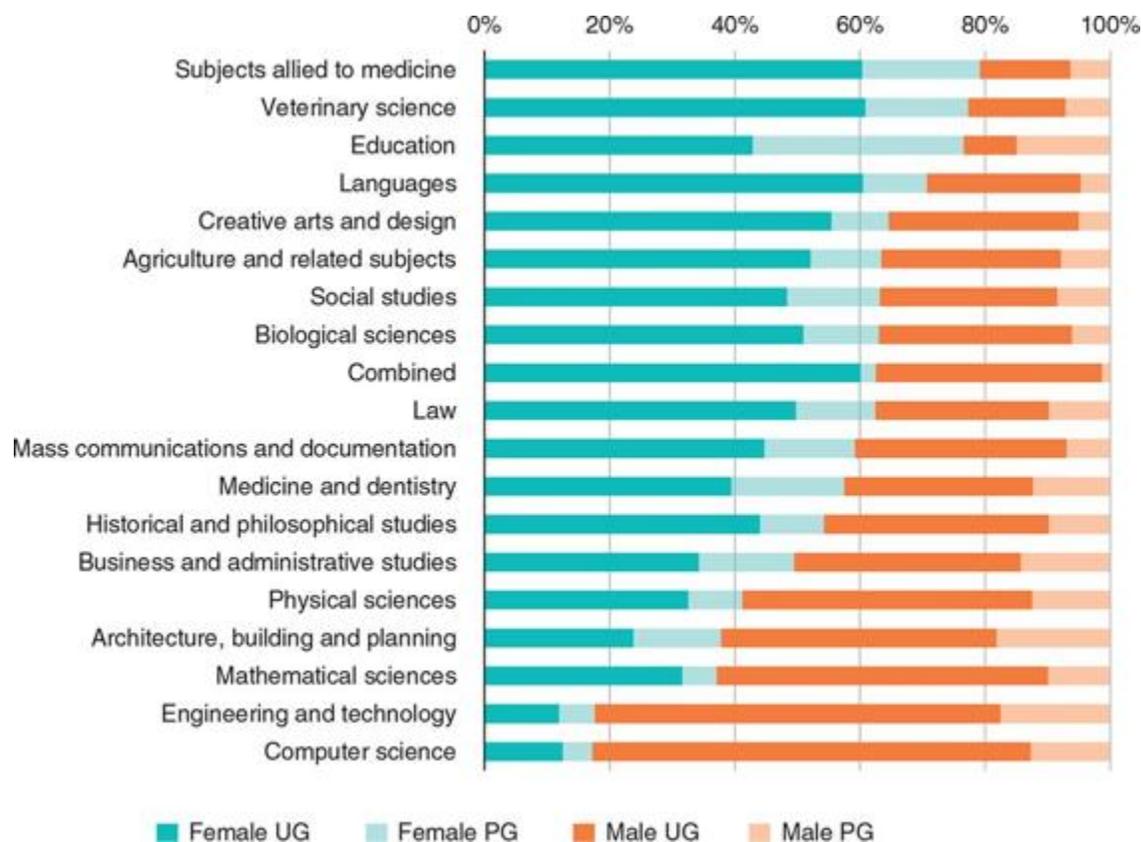
Figure 16.6 UK undergraduate and postgraduate students by subjects of study and gender, 2016–17

Source: Universities UK (2018: 20).

Gender and higher education

Perhaps the most significant feature of higher education expansion has been the rapid increase in the number of female students. For example, since the 1970s the UK has seen much faster growth rates for women entering further and higher education than for men (figure 16.6). By

1990 there were more women than men in further education, and by 2005 the same was true of higher education – a dramatic reversal of the position in the 1970s, when there were far more male than female students. By 2007 there were seven times as many women in further and higher education than in 1970, but only around two and a half times as many men. In 2016–17 women made up 57.5 per cent of all higher education students (Universities UK 2018: 16). However, in spite of this change, subject choice remains stubbornly marked by conventional gender expectations (figure 16.6; see figure 16.4 for EU data).

The earlier pattern of subject choice in the developed countries saw women pursuing degrees in education and the health professions, which led into lower-paid careers than those from computer science and engineering subjects, which were dominated by men. Women have made some inroads into the latter subjects, though they remain male-dominated today. Universities UK (2018: 20) reports that, in 2016–17, 82.8 per cent of computer science students and 82.4 per cent of engineering and technology students were men. On the other hand, many degree subjects previously dominated by men, including the social sciences, history and education, have become predominantly 'female' subjects. What does *not* appear to be happening is a move by men into the university subjects that were previously considered 'female', such as nursing, creative arts and design.

Women are still under-represented among the academic staff in colleges and universities, especially in senior positions. In 2010–11, for example, although women made up 44.5 per cent of academic staff in the UK (80,775), just 20 per cent of professors were female (3,790) and 38.6 per cent of senior lecturers and researchers (HESA 2010). However, since 2009 the number of female professors has increased by around 50 per cent, and by 2016–17 women made up 25 per cent of all professorial posts (Universities UK 2018: 27).

Similarly, some 72 per cent of senior managers and 80 per cent of university principals and vice-principals were men (Parr 2014), and more female academics than their male colleagues work part-time (Equality Challenge Unit 2013: 34). Nonetheless, the longer-term trend is moving towards greater gender equality in higher education, and the

number of female professors, though still relatively low, is at an all-time high. The number of female academics is also increasing.

Given the unequal situation with regard to type of contract, seniority and the likelihood of high-level promotion, women in higher education are, on average, paid less than men. Even at the same professional position, the level of pay is unequal. The UK's Higher Education Statistics Agency reported that, in 2008, male professors were paid 13.9 per cent more than female professors. What we may conclude from this brief survey is that girls and women have made significant headway within education systems since 1970. But there remain significant inequalities as highly educated women move into the workforce, with men maintaining their traditionally better rates of pay and promotion prospects. Even within twenty-first-century universities, it seems that men maintain their longstanding domination of positions of seniority and high status.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> 'There are no reasons to be concerned about the underperformance of boys today.' List some possible consequences for society if boys fall further behind girls in their performance in school. What could be done to halt the process?

Ethnic diversity, racism and achievement

Evidence of racial discrimination in the UK, Europe and elsewhere has accumulated since the 1960s, and, as early as 1985, significant differences in average levels of educational success between groups from different ethnic backgrounds in the UK were reported to government (Swann Committee 1985).

Data from English schools for 2017–18 show that students with the lowest average exam scores at age sixteen were those of white Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller heritage. Black students (particularly black Caribbean), white British, Pakistani, and mixed white/black Caribbean students all scored below the overall average performance, while Bangladeshi, Indian, black African, Chinese, mixed white/Asian

and white Irish students achieved above average scores (Race Disparity Unit 2019). The picture is clearly quite a diverse one. The most significant indicator of underachievement from these data was, in fact, eligibility for free school meals (FSM), an indicator of socio-economic deprivation. The average score for pupils eligible for free meals was 34.4, almost 14 points below the average of 48.3 for those who were not eligible. And the finding of below average achievement was consistent for FSM students across all ethnic groups, including those with the highest average scores, demonstrating the persistent influence of social class position on educational achievement and the value of undertaking intersectional studies that explore the complex patterns produced by the intertwining inequalities of ethnicity, class and gender.

Yet, although educational policy-makers today are sensitive to issues of discrimination and underachievement, Law and Irwin (2016: 7) argue that gaining recognition from governments of everyday racial discrimination has been, 'a long and arduous task, let alone building a platform of successful interventions to tackle these fundamental problems.' One reason is that ideas continually resurface which 'naturalize' ethnic differences and blame the individual for their own lack of achievement. Underachievement among Gypsy/Roma groups, Irish Travellers, black Caribbean and some Asian Muslim students, for example, has tended to be 'explained' in terms of ethnic cultures, family practices, lifestyles and personal beliefs, while the relative success of Chinese and Indian students is said to lie in their personal commitment to hard work and/or their parents' ambitions for their children. In this way, policy discourses sidestep the difficult issue of racism and its effects within the school system, despite numerous reports from children from these backgrounds that they experience racism on a daily basis (Archer and Francis 2007).

Wright's participant observation study of relationships in four UK inner-city primary schools recorded children's experiences of racism over an extended period of three years. She found that racial harassment was part of the daily experience of black and Asian pupils, who were often victimized by white children. Social processes leading to racism and discrimination that exist in the wider society are also found within schools. Wright (1992: 103) argues that 'staff, like most

other people, do treat people differently on the basis of perceived "racial" characteristics. Further, many nursery and primary staff were reluctant to accept that younger children can hold incipient racist attitudes and exhibit hostility towards members of other groups.' Teachers often assumed that African-Caribbean boys were 'disruptive' and were quick to reprimand and control their behaviour, while Asian children were perceived as willing to learn and compliant with teachers' instructions. Social stereotypes led to a certain level of fear among staff, which fed into the reinforcement of stereotypes. Wright acknowledged that the teachers were committed to equal treatment but were also caught up in wider, discriminatory social processes.

Like other institutions and organizations, education systems harbour the potential for institutional racism. In education, this concept refers to the way that school life is structured, which dress codes are deemed appropriate, and what the content of the curriculum should be. For instance, white middle-class teachers may interpret the behaviour and dress styles of black pupils as evidence of 'disruptive' behaviour, leading to higher than average levels of temporary and permanent exclusions. Indeed, a consistent finding is that, in English schools, by far the most common reason for both fixed-period and permanent exclusion from school continues to be 'persistently disruptive behaviour' (DfE 2018b). This suggests that ethnocentrism – the assumption that one's own familiar culture constitutes the norm – plays a part in racial discrimination within schools (Mason 2000).

In 2016–17 the highest permanent exclusion rates in England were for children of Gypsy/Roma and Irish Traveller heritage, though absolute numbers for these groups are very small. Black Caribbean pupils had a permanent exclusion rate almost three times that of the school population overall, while children from Asian ethnic groups were least likely to be permanently excluded from school (DfE 2018b). Some other groups, including Chinese and Indian students, also have relatively low rates of school exclusions. Findings from the USA exhibit a similar pattern. Sociologists have found that rates of school exclusions tend to reflect broader patterns of disadvantage. It is notable, for example, that students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds (indicated by eligibility for free school meals) made up 40 per cent of permanent

exclusions in 2016–17, while pupils with special educational needs accounted for 46.7 per cent (DfE 2018b).

Institutional racism was introduced in [chapter 8](#), 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration', in relation to the Stephen Lawrence case (Macpherson 1999).

Such findings have led some to advocate multicultural forms of education requiring curriculum change to bring currently ignored national histories, religions and cultures into the classroom (Mahalingam and McCarthy 2000; Race 2010). This has happened to a limited extent in religious education, where pupils are introduced to the diversity of religious beliefs and practices. Yet historical facts never 'speak for themselves', and disputes continue about how, for instance, British colonialism, imperial expansion and involvement in the black slave trade should be taught. An alternative approach is to include anti-racist education, which involves multicultural teaching but goes further, to challenge inequalities by helping both staff and young people to understand how racist attitudes and stereotypes develop and how they can deal with them when they arise. Anti-racist education attempts actively to identify and challenge discriminatory language, actions and policies *within* the school. The main issue raised by critics is the potential for such teaching to reinforce divisions and to contribute to the 'racialization' of conflicts within the school community. While multiculturalist and anti-racist approaches are somewhat different, some argue that a 'critical multiculturalist' approach, which encourages students (and teachers) to analyse the ways in which privilege and oppression are produced, offers the best way forward (May and Sleeter 2010; Sloan et al. 2018).

Social stereotypes may affect the way teachers treat children from different ethnic groups. For example, African-Caribbean children are often assumed to be 'disruptive'.

See chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration', for a discussion of critical race theory (CRT) in sociology.

Higher education

In UK higher education, minority ethnic groups were not, on the whole, under-represented in the early twenty-first century. In 2017–18, enrolment statistics showed that 76 per cent of new students were classified as white, 11 per cent as Asian and 7 per cent as black (HESA 2019). The 2011 Census of England and Wales reported that 86 per cent of the population identified as white, 7.5 per cent as Asian and 3.3 per cent as black (ONS 2018b). However, people from Indian and Chinese backgrounds were, on average, significantly more likely than those from other ethnic backgrounds to have a degree qualification or higher. Men who defined themselves as 'mixed race' and women who defined themselves as 'black/black British' and 'Asian/Asian British' were slightly less likely than the national average to have gained a degree or higher qualification (ONS 2004: 46–7).

There are also significant differences in subject choices among black and minority ethnic groups (BME) in the UK. In 2016–17, BME groups accounted for over 30 per cent of all students in medicine, dentistry, law and business and administrative studies and around 25 per cent in computer science and engineering and technology. Conversely, very small numbers studied veterinary science, agriculture, history and philosophy and the physical sciences (see figure 16.7).

Inequality is pronounced among minority ethnic academic staff groups. For example, in 2011–12, although 13.8 per cent of UK Chinese academic staff were professors, only 4.1 per cent of black academics had made professorial status, the lowest of any ethnic group. Overall, BME staff made up 9.6 per cent of professorial posts in 2016–17 (Universities UK 2018: 28). Among full-time academics, 24.5 per cent of

white UK staff earned more than £50,000 per year compared with 13.6 per cent of staff from UK minority ethnic groups. A higher proportion of UK white academics (81.4 per cent) than those from minority ethnic backgrounds were also employed on open or permanent contracts. The lowest percentage (69.7 per cent) was among full-time Asian academic staff (Equality Challenge Unit 2013: 72–80). It seems that, although BME groups have made progress in terms of studying in UK higher education, they are still paid less, have more precarious contracts and are under-represented within the sector, particularly in the higher positions.

Evaluation

Inequalities within education systems have proved remarkably persistent, and today it remains the case that 'social class is the strongest predictor of educational achievement' (Perry and Francis 2010: 6). However, class intersects with gender and ethnicity to produce quite complex patterns of inequality and achievement. For example, a 2011 survey of the attainment and progress of more than 14,500 students aged eleven and fourteen found that, although socio-economic variables explained the attainment gap for black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi students compared with their white British peers, it did not do so for black Caribbean students (Strand 2011). Similarly, girls outperform boys in each social class category.

As we have seen in relation to gender inequalities, there can be quite radical change too. Educational opportunities for women opened up considerably over the second half of the twentieth century, though they have taken time to become established. Economic restructuring, which reduced the need for heavy manual work in favour of postindustrial employment in the service sector, has been a major structural factor favouring a better trained and educated female workforce. Nonetheless, differences in the educational experiences of ethnic groups also shows that inequality in education is strongly linked to social and cultural factors as well as to economic ones.
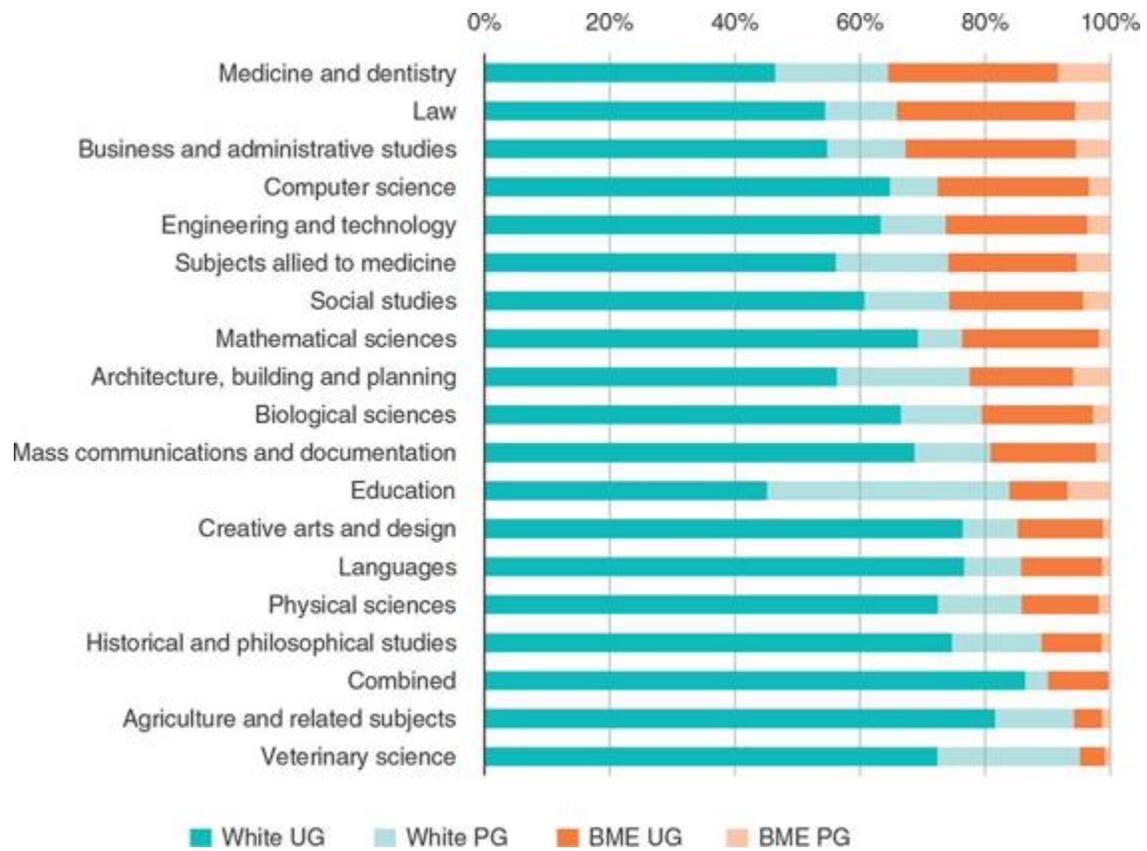
Figure 16.7 UK undergraduate and postgraduate students by subject of study and ethnicity, 2016–17

Source: Universities UK (2018: 20).

Education in global context

The diversity of educational provision is a striking feature of the world today. As we saw in the chapter introduction, in the developing world many people still struggle to gain access to education and illiteracy is widespread, while in the developed countries issues of choice and consumerism are more likely to exercise parents and governments. If inequalities *within* countries are proving difficult to tackle, then inequalities *between* the countries of the developed and developing worlds are an even bigger challenge.

One effective way of comparing the world's national education systems is to look at government spending on education. Figure 16.8 presents the broad picture of the percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) spent by the countries and regions of the world. However, given the diversity of local currencies, comparing spending by national governments is not a simple task. In order to compare cost per student and the size of national education budgets, local currencies must be converted into a standard measure. According to UNESCO's Institute for Statistics, 'purchasing power parities' (PPPs) best reflect the real value of educational investment. PPPs are rates of currency conversion that eliminate differences in price levels among countries. So, a given sum of money, converted into US dollars at PPP rates, will buy the same basket of goods and services in all countries.
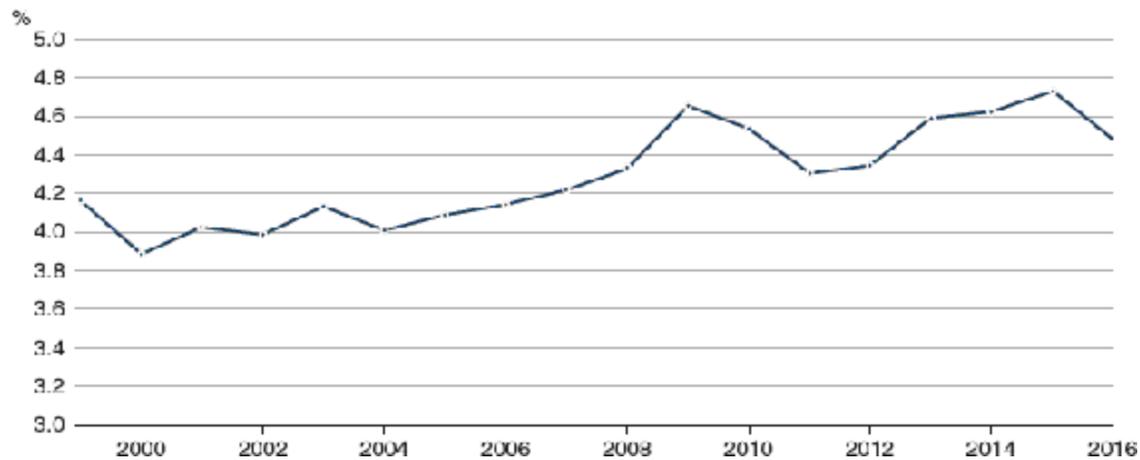
Figure 16.8 Government expenditure on education, 1970–2018

Source: World Bank (2020b).

In 2011, UNESCO (2014) estimated that the world's governments spent 5.1 per cent of global Gross National Product (GNP) on education, up from 4.6 per cent in 1999. The highest levels of spending were in North America and Western Europe, with 6.2 per cent of regional GNP. The lowest levels of spending were in South and West Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. In its *Global Education Monitoring Report*, UNESCO (2018: 235–6) estimated that, of the $4.7 trillion spent on education globally, 65 per cent, or $3 trillion, was spent in the high-income countries. Just 0.5 per cent, or $22 billion, was spent in the low-income countries, despite the school-age population being similar in both.

UNESCO also reported that thirty low- and middle-income countries increased their education spending by at least 1 per cent between 1999 and 2011. Yet only forty-one of 150 countries had hit the UNESCO target of allocating 6 per cent of GNP for education spending. In the Arab countries and South and West Asia, education spending as a percentage of GNP actually fell between 1999 and 2011. For developing countries, the credit crisis of 2008 and global economic downturn followed rapid rises in world food prices between 2003 and 2008. As a result, poor families were forced to cut back on spending for their children's education in order to buy food. In Bangladesh, for instance, around one-third of poor households reported doing just that (UNESCO 2010: 7).

The developed countries established recovery plans aimed at restoring economic growth, but, in developing countries, the main source of expanding 'fiscal space' in the short term lies in increased levels of foreign aid. In 2014 UNESCO reported that government commitments on aid levels made in 2005 had not been met; aid for basic education fell by 6 per cent between 2010 and 2011, hitting the poorest countries hardest (UNESCO 2014: 111). However, by 2016, aid provided for education reached US$13.4 billion, a 13 per cent increase since 2015 and the highest level since recording began in 2002 (UNESCO 2018: 242). As a result, aid for basic education rose by 17 per cent in the same period, and it may be that aid levels are recovering after a decade of austerity following the 2008 global financial crash.

Primary school enrolments

In the developed countries, much emphasis is placed on giving children a good start in life by providing quality early years education. A useful way of measuring this aim globally is to examine the number of children enrolled in some form of primary education. Between 1999 and 2004, enrolment improved spectacularly, to around 86 per cent, with the largest increases in sub-Saharan Africa (27 per cent) and South and West Asia (19 per cent) (UNESCO 2008; also see figure 16.9). Yet by 2018 there were still 59 million primary-age children (aged six to eleven) not in any form of education, more than half of these (32 million) in sub-Saharan Africa, where girls are more likely than boys to be out of primary school (UNESCO 2018: 1). This is inevitably an underestimate, however, as not all those who are enrolled actually attend regularly or at all (Bruneforth 2006).

A 2008 UNESCO survey found that residence was a significant factor, with around one-third of out-of-school primary age children living in rural areas. Household wealth was also important: 38 per cent of children in the poorest fifth of households in 2008 were not in primary education compared with 25 per cent of the middle fifth and just 1 per cent of the wealthiest fifth. Once again, we can see the issue of social class and educational inequality arising, this time at the global level. The final factor is whether mothers had been involved in education themselves. Whereas just 16 per cent of children whose mothers had

some education were not in primary school, the figure for those whose mothers had had no education was 38 per cent (UNESCO 2008). This may indicate the value families place on education, and the existence of positive role models is a crucial element in raising attendance levels. Clearly, primary school attendance is fundamental if global levels of basic literacy are to be improved.
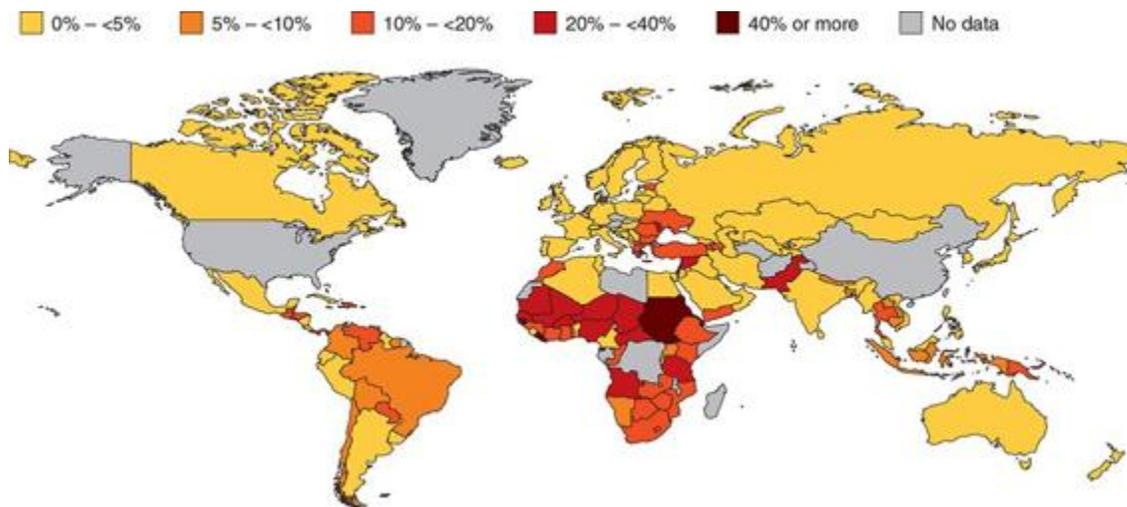
Figure 16.9 Primary out-of-school rate, 2018 or latest year

Source: UNESCO (2019:10).

Literacy and illiteracy

In 2017, around 750 million adults (fifteen years and over) across the world did not have basic literacy skills, and 63 per cent of these were women (see table 16.1). Almost half of the non-literate population lived in South Asia (49 per cent), over a quarter in sub-Saharan Africa (27 per cent), and another 10 per cent in East and South-East Asia (UNESCO 2017: 3). However, illiteracy exists in every society, including those in the developed world. In England, for example, literacy rates are among the highest in the world, but about 5 per cent of adults aged between sixteen and sixty-five still perform below the literacy level expected of seven-year-old children. National literacy rates below 50 per cent are recorded in twenty countries, including Afghanistan, Benin, Chad, Ethiopia, Iraq and Senegal.

Over time, global literacy rates have been increasing, and this remains true in regions and nations with the highest levels of illiteracy. One way

to measure this is to compare youth literacy rates with those of older groups. Globally the literacy rate among fifteen- to 24-year-olds is 13 percentage points higher than in adults aged sixty-five and older. Some 91 per cent of young people had at least basic levels of literacy compared with just 78 per cent of over sixtyfives. In sub-Saharan Africa, just 36 per cent of over sixty-fives have at least basic literacy skills, while in South Asia the figure is 42 per cent. Yet the situation among those aged fifteen to twenty-four is changing rapidly. Some 89 per cent of young people in South Asia and 75 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa had achieved a basic literacy level in 2016 (UNESCO 2017: 9–10).

See chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change', for more detail on the global spread of ICT.

The evidence here is that literacy levels continue to rise even in the regions where, historically, it has been difficult to envisage real progress. With expanding populations and large numbers of adults without basic literacy skills, some relatively poor countries and regions face a formidable obstacle in the competitive global economy. And, though progress is being made in many areas, the gender gap remains remarkably stable, with girls and women still accounting for around 63 per cent of the global non-literate population (figure 16.10).

Table 16.1 Global literacy rates and illiterate population by age groups, 2016

Source: UNESCO (2017: 3).

Indicator	Adults (aged 15 years and older)	Youth (aged 5–24 years)	Population aged 25–64 years	Elderly (aged 65 years and older)
Global literacy rate (%)				
Both sexes	86	91	86	78
Men	90	93	90	83
Women	83	90	82	73
Gender parity index	0.97	0.96	0.92	0.87
Global illiterate population (millions)				
Both sexes	750	102	507	141
Men	277	44	186	47
Women	473	58	321	94
Share of women (%)	63	57	63	67
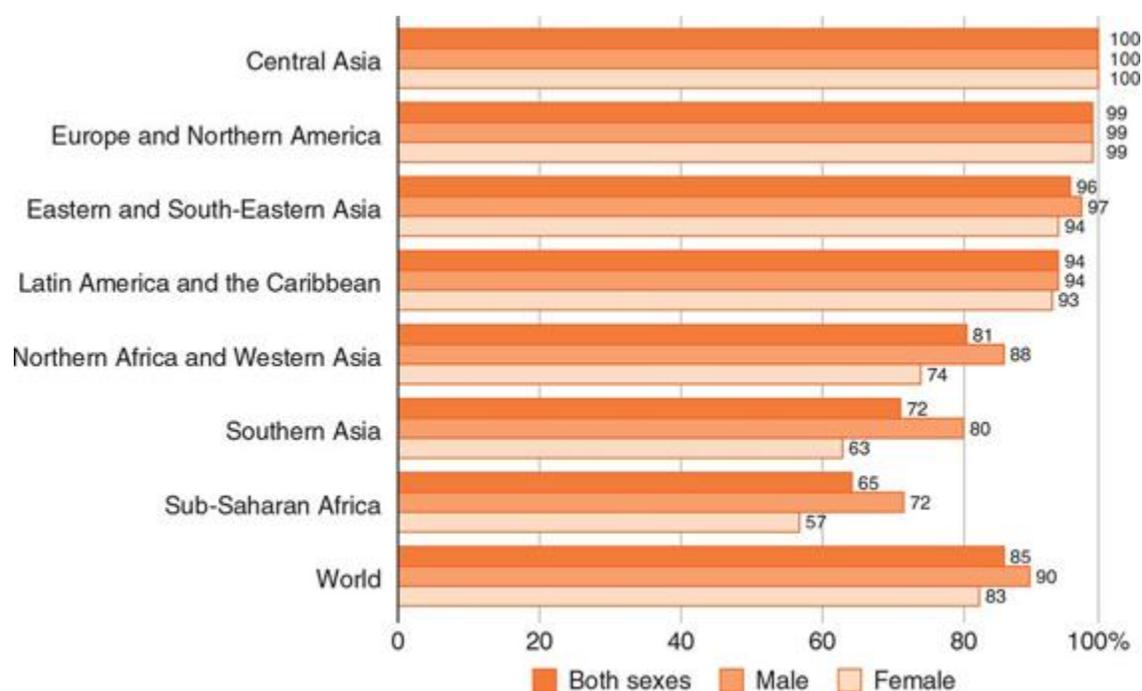
Figure 16.10 Adult literacy rate by region and sex, 2016

Source: UNESCO (2017: 5).

It has been suggested that a new kind of illiteracy may be emerging as digital devices and information technology become commonplace in work and domestic environments. This could see large numbers of people with no regular access to information technology or training for its use, and no familiarity with the specialized language of computing, becoming disadvantaged in new ways. We will return to this issue in the final part of the chapter.

See [chapter 6](), 'Global Inequality', for a broader discussion of literacy and illiteracy.

Creating literate environments

Levels of government and private expenditure on education not only bring children and young people into free schooling but can also help to create 'literate environments'. There are clear links between educational expenditure, primary-school attendance and literacy. Literate environments are those spaces which provide numerous opportunities for the newly literate to exercise their skills, offering, for example, a range of printed and visual materials such as newspapers, magazines and books; easy access to continuing education such as in schools and training centres; opportunities to be involved in organizations where literacy skills can be used, such as local government or agricultural cooperatives; and chances to work in businesses or non-for-profit organizations that allow the exercise of

literate skills (Easton 2006). Primary and other schools are obviously literate environments, which benefit very young children and young people, but literate environments can also be created in libraries and other public spaces, as well as in workplaces and even private homes.

Global society 16.1 The threat of literacy in colonial regimes

During the period of colonialism, colonial governments regarded education with some trepidation. Until the twentieth century, most believed indigenous populations to be too primitive to be worthy of educating. Later, education was seen as a way of making local elites responsive to European interests and ways of life. But, to some extent, the result was to foment discontent and rebellion, since the majority of those who led anti-colonial and nationalist movements were from educated elites who had attended schools or colleges in Europe. They were able to compare at first hand the democratic institutions of the European countries with the absence of democracy in their lands of origin.

The education that the colonizers introduced usually pertained to Europe, not to the colonial areas themselves. Educated Africans in the British colonies knew about the kings and queens of England and read Shakespeare, Milton and the English poets, but they learned next to nothing about their own countries' history or past cultural achievements. Policies of educational reform since the end of colonialism have not completely altered the situation, even today.

Partly as a result of the legacy of colonial education, which was not directed towards the majority of the population, the educational system in many developing countries is top-heavy: higher education is disproportionately developed relative to primary and secondary education. The consequence is a correspondingly overqualified group who, having attended colleges and universities, cannot find white-collar or professional jobs. Given the low level of industrial development, most of the better-paid positions are in government, and there are not enough of those to go around.

In recent years, some developing countries, recognizing the shortcomings of the curricula inherited from colonialism, have tried to redirect their educational programmes towards the rural poor. They have had limited success, because usually there is insufficient

funding to pay for the scale of the necessary innovations. As a result, countries such as India have begun programmes of self-help education. Communities draw on existing resources without creating demands for high levels of finance. Those who can read and write and who perhaps possess job skills are encouraged to take on others as apprentices, whom they coach in their spare time.

The links between literacy and development are discussed in [chapter 6](#), 'Global Inequality'.

THINKING CRITICALLY

How should former colonial powers help their former colonies to catch up in today's global economy? What could they offer that would not lead to the charge of creating a relationship of dependency?

Apart from providing opportunities for the exercise of literacy skills, the main significance of literate environments may be in their impact on people's *motivation* to become literate or improve their levels of literacy. Today, however, if they are to be successful in tackling illiteracy in the future, literate environments will have to be able to provide access to electronic forms of communication as well as more conventional forms.

Education systems in development

The digital revolution is changing education systems today, but there are other challenges too, such as how to accommodate the demand for more choice in education and how schools should be funded in the future. To get a sense of the way that education systems in the developed countries changed over the twentieth century, we will take a brief tour of the development of education in the UK, specifically England and Wales. Although education systems are diverse, a single case can reveal some of the key issues arising at different historical moments.

Secondary schooling

The education system in England and Wales has developed through several stages. In its early development, provision was diverse and strongly religious in orientation. After 1945 the state became centrally involved and, gradually, the system moved towards compulsory universal education for all – first through a three-part system based on perceived intelligence, and later in a comprehensive education system. However, from the 1990s there has been a movement away from uniform provision towards a model of consumer choice, with increasingly diverse types of school, more parental choice, employer-focused schooling and less local authority control. The brief sketch below highlights some key developments in this process.

Between 1870 (when compulsory education was first established) and the Second World War, successive British governments increased their expenditure on education. The minimum school-leaving age rose from ten to fourteen and more schools were built, but education was not considered a major area for government intervention. Private and church authorities under the supervision of local government boards ran schools, most of which would today be described as 'faith schools', with a strongly religious content. The Second World War (1939–45) changed this situation, as authorities were shocked by the widespread low level of educational skills among recruits. Concerned about the

prospects for post-war recovery, the government began to rethink education provision and settled on a tripartite system of grammar, secondary technical, and secondary modern schools, which sifted pupils on the basis of an examination at the age of eleven (the so-called '11-plus' exam) (Halsey 1997).

By the 1960s, it was clear that the system established in 1947, of selecting pupils considered more intelligent for a grammar-school education at the age of eleven, had not reached expectations. Only 12 per cent of pupils continued in school until the age of seventeen, and early leaving was shown to be more closely related to class background than to academic performance (CACE 1959). In 1965 the Labour government moved towards a more standardized and uniform comprehensive education for the state sector. But from the early 1970s the educational expansion that characterized the post-war period was replaced by contraction and efforts to reduce government expenditure.

Education has long been a political battleground, and one protracted debate centred on the impact of comprehensive schooling and its results. The architects of comprehensive education believed that the new system would produce equality of opportunity. In 1979 the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher criticized comprehensive schooling, believing that selective grammar schools should be saved and that the power of local education authorities should be reduced. The 1988 Education Act introduced a universal national curriculum for the state sector and local management of schools, devolving their administration to balance the inevitable centralization involved in the national curriculum.

A new group of city technology colleges and grant-maintained schools was also promoted. The latter could 'opt out' of local authority control and receive funding directly from the state – effectively becoming businesses funded from central government – with the right to select up to 50 per cent of their student intake on the basis of 'ability'. The government hoped all schools would opt out and eventually become grant-maintained. But by 1995 only 1,000 state schools from a total of 23,000 had done so. Gewirtz and her colleagues (1995) found that, for many parents, the choice of school was severely limited, as the real

extent of 'choice' depended largely on parents' income and class position.

The Labour government elected in 1997 proposed intervention in all schools assessed as having chronically sub-standard performance and emphasized the importance of good teaching methods and strong leadership as the keys to educational reform. Grant-maintained schools became 'foundation schools', retaining a high degree of independence and focusing on specific subject areas such as technology, arts or maths. These schools were still allowed to select up to 10 per cent of their intake according to ability in these specialist areas.

Diversification and 'choice'

City academies were created in deprived areas and became heavily oversubscribed. Sponsors from the private and charitable sectors provided 20 per cent of start-up costs and the state paid the rest. Critics claimed that this generous funding of academies drained resources from other types of school. Where a school was deemed to be failing, government agencies intervened directly to take it over and, in some cases, reopened it as a city academy. Education action zones were created in areas of high deprivation using government and private-sector funding to attract teachers and tackle social exclusion. By 2005 there were seventy-three education action zones across England.

In 2010, a Conservative-led coalition government set out a new focus on returning to 'traditional' educational values, encouraging 'blazer and tie' uniforms, discipline, and good spelling and grammar. The size of the compulsory national curriculum was to be pared back, head teachers would be given more powers, and pupils would be encouraged to take the traditionally more 'rigorous' 'STEM' subjects – sciences, technology, engineering and mathematics. A 'pupil premium' was also introduced: a fixed annual sum per pupil paid to schools for those in receipt of free school meals to provide extra resources to help poorer students increase their attainment. The government also encouraged *all* schools to become academies free of local authority control, and a 2014 report by the Department for Education suggested that state schools that converted to become academies were more likely than other schools to

raise their overall status from 'good' to 'outstanding' and to see more pupils achieving the higher grades at GCSE level. Critics saw academies as reducing democratic accountability, carrying forward the gradual privatization of the state education system (BBC News 2012b).

Kulz's (2017) year-long study of one successful urban academy – which she calls Dreamfields – describes it as a 'factory for learning', where children undergo strict training and institutional discipline on the school's 'conveyor belt' that produces a compliant student body. This reflects the increasing employment focus of the school system under the invasive free-market ethos of today's 'neo-liberal' economy. In particular, the aim of Dreamfields was to counter what the head teacher believed were the unstructured, chaotic home lives of black, white and Asian working-class children. This meant creating a strong structure and daily routines based on inculcating white middle-class values and standards of success, thereby encouraging aspiration. This was summarized in the academy's ethos that 'structure liberates'. It was also actively practised by students, who, for instance, made a 'pledge of allegiance to the self and its aspirational fulfilment' before every lesson (ibid.: 58).

Dreamfields was relentlessly positive in its promotion of the school as a meritocracy that holds out the promise of social mobility for all. And though the school's results were generally better than those of its neighbours, children whose behaviour did not meet the expected standards faced being placed in learning support units or excluded from school altogether. Issues of race were kept out of staff discussions, and teachers did not openly talk about race or racism but used coded language, such as 'urban children', instead (Kulz 2017: 87). Kulz's study shows that the turn towards discipline and a rigidly structured school environment did not tackle educational inequalities of gender, race and class but, like schooling more generally, continued to reproduce them.

The most controversial policy change was enabling a new type of school, the 'free school', based on the 'charter schools' of the USA and Sweden's own free school model. Free schools are privately governed and state-funded academies set up and run by parents, charities, businesses, teachers or religious groups. By February 2019 there were 442 free schools, with around 400,000 students, and a further 262 in

process (New Schools Network 2019). By October 2019, some 50.1 per cent of students were in in state-funded academies or free schools (DfE 2019). However, not all of the proposed free schools actually came to fruition. By 2018, sixty-six free schools had been either partially closed or just never opened at all (Inge 2018). Critics argue that free schools are most attractive to wealthier middle-class groups, and, over time, this will create a two-tier system in which funding and the best teachers will gravitate towards free schools, leaving state schools as the poor relation. For example, in 2014, only 9.4 per cent of free school pupils received free school meals compared to the national average of 16.7 per cent (Florack 2014: 220–1). Because free schools can limit their intake to create smaller class sizes, there have also been concerns about cost, both in strict financial terms and for the education system as a whole.

Summary

A reasonable conclusion from this brief overview is that the post-1945 movement towards a unified national education system of comprehensive schooling for all is, at least for now, over. Since the mid-1990s, successive governments have introduced reforms that have led to an increasing diversity of provision, geographical disparities, a consumer choice model, and the gradual removal of local authority control and accountability. Indeed, the emerging situation begins to look rather more like that which existed before the 1870 Education Act, with a variety of education providers that are relatively unconnected to one another.

Increasing parental choice in the system seems likely to reinforce existing social inequalities, as middle-class families are better placed to negotiate and, in the case of free schools, help to create the increasingly fragmented educational landscape. As Ball (2013) suggests, 'Bluntly, this fuzzy system of unclear and uneven provision offers the opportunity for well-informed, wellresourced, confident and persistent parents, many of whom are middle class, to seek social advantage for their children.'

Higher education in the UK

Higher education (HE) in the UK has, as in many other countries, expanded rapidly since the 1980s. There were twenty-one universities in Britain in the 1950s, but most were very small by today's standards. Between 1945 and 1970 the system grew to be four times larger. Older universities expanded, and new ones, such as at Sussex, Stirling and York – labelled 'red-brick' universities – were built. A binary system was set up with the creation of polytechnics, which concentrated more on vocational courses. Today, higher education has a 'standard coinage': a degree from Lancaster, Aberdeen or Bristol, at least in theory, is of the same standard as one from Cambridge or Oxford. Yet Oxford and Cambridge are noted for their highly selective intake, about half of whom come from fee-paying schools. Clearly major social divisions are not confined to the compulsory education sector.

In 1900–1 there were a mere 25,000 students in full-time higher education in the UK, but by 1971 this had increased to 457,000, and by 2016–17 there were just over 1 million (Universities UK 2018: 8). Social class background influences the likelihood of participation in higher education, and, though involvement of those from working-class backgrounds has increased, it remains well below that of students from non-manual classes. Debates about widening access have been central to the question of how higher education should be funded.

While the number of students in higher education has expanded enormously, government spending has not increased at the same rate. Funding per student fell by 29 per cent in real terms between 1976 and 1989, and by a further 38 per cent between 1989 and 1999. The Dearing Report (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997) concluded that the expansion and improvement of higher education would be impossible under existing funding arrangements. The result has been a crisis in funding for higher education, made more acute by the UK government's debt reduction measures following the global downturn in 2008. So, who should pay for HE?

The two main sources of large-scale investment in universities are taxation and those who experience and benefit from higher education – that is, students. Some argue that, given the social and economic

benefits that higher education provides for society, university funding should be met by the taxpayer. Where would we be without doctors, teachers and other professional groups? Others maintain that those taxpayers who do not go to university should not have to pay for those who do. Graduates enjoy many career advantages, earning (on average) significantly more over a lifetime than non-graduates, and it would be unfair to expect non-graduates to pay for the rewards of others.

In 2010 tuition fees were raised from just over £3,000 per year to £6,000, with a maximum of £9,000 if certain criteria on widening access were met. The policy was met with large-scale student marches, sit-ins at universities, and confrontations between police and students in London. Student leaders argued that students should not have to suffer because of the reckless actions of bankers and politicians that had led to the 2008 financial crash. Critics argued that raising fees so steeply would deter under-represented groups, such as working-class students, who would baulk at the prospect of incurring a large debt. Yet this did not happen, and student numbers, including those from working-class groups, did not fall. As student loans do not have to be paid back until graduates reach a certain salary level (and are written off if they do not reach this after thirty years), against expectations, the new system appears not to have created an obstacle to participation in higher education.

University students in the UK protested against increasing tuition fees. But has the new funding model actually achieved its aims?

A second criticism concerned the impact on universities themselves. The chair of the Heads and Professors of Sociology group argued that a three-tier system might emerge. A small upper tier of research-intensive universities will continue to do well, a larger middle tier of teaching-only universities will struggle to survive, and a third tier of teaching-only universities will be forced into mergers or even to close down altogether (Holmwood 2010). Again, though, as most universities charged the maximum £9,000 course fees, funding did not drop significantly. In 2016–17 the income of the UK HE sector was £35.7

billion, half of which was from student tuition fees (Universities UK 2018: 30).

In 2019, a government review of post-eighteen education recommended, among other things, reducing fees to £7,500 per annum, extending the student loan repayment period to forty years, removing the 'in-study' interest rate (while at university) and introducing a cap limiting the total amount payable to 1.2 times the original loan (Augar et al. 2019). Reintroducing maintenance grants was also proposed, and this would be a benefit for students from low-income backgrounds. However, extending the loan period by ten years means graduates on moderate earnings would likely have to pay off more of the debt than previously. And the highest-earning graduates would benefit most as they would have a lower debt level and, hence, could pay off the loan more quickly.

If implemented, the Augar recommendations would also hit humanities and social science departments, as these degrees are to be paid for from student fees, with a teaching grant for 'additional costs' available only to science, engineering and mathematics degrees. At the time of writing, it remains unclear which, if any, of these recommendations will be accepted by the Conservative government elected in December 2019. Having moved towards a student contribution model of HE funding, the Augar review demonstrates that turning the existing framework into a sustainable funding model for the long term has not yet been achieved. In addition, the 2019–20 Covid-19 pandemic saw university campuses effectively closed down for several months, with some classes continuing online. Given the continuing restrictions on international transport and new social distancing measures (at the time of writing), it seems likely that, in the short to medium term, course delivery and funding models in the HE sector will be significantly affected. For instance, Cambridge University announced that it would be moving all of its lectures online for the 2020–21 academic year. It is not clear whether universities still be able to charge full tuition fees as the student experience undergoes such a significant change.

From the UK case overall, we can see the changing face of education systems in many developed countries. The twentieth century saw compulsory schooling become established, and years spent in

education rose for all social classes. Strict selection on the basis of testing gave way, in the 1960s and 1970s, to more comprehensive models of schooling, but by the 1990s that trend had gone into reverse. In higher education, universities opened their doors to a broader section of the population, but, as the elite system turned into a mass HE system, the thorny question of who pays became a serious issue that has not yet been settled. The next big challenge for education systems will be how to make effective use of the new digital technologies and, for universities, whether the large-scale, 'red brick' physical university will survive the digital revolution.

The digitization of learning

Education traditionally provided the skills of literacy and numeracy, giving access to the world of printed media. But this is changing as computers, multimedia technologies, tablets, e-book readers and smartphones replace hard copies of schoolbooks and learning resources. Employers require a computer-literate workforce, and education systems play a critical role in serving this need. Digital technologies will not just add to the existing curriculum but may well transform it, as young people's use of digital devices becomes second nature.

Digital classrooms?

In most of the developed countries, education systems have been modernized and computerized, and some observers talk of a classroom revolution, the arrival of desk-top virtual reality and the classroom without walls. There is little question that computers have expanded opportunities in education. They provide the chance for children to work independently, to research topics online, and to benefit from educational software that allows them to progress at their own pace. However, although computer ownership has risen sharply, many children still do not have access to a computer at home. Hence, access to digital devices for learning may be the latest arena in which, as we saw earlier, middle-class parents can ensure their children maintain an educational advantage. Schools are a crucial site for young people to learn about and become comfortable with computing and digital technologies.

An OECD study in the early twenty-first century assessed the educational performance of fifteen-year-old students and found that regular computer use led to better scores, particularly in mathematics. Students who had used computers for several years generally performed better at maths than the OECD average, while those with infrequent access to computers, or who had used them for only a short time, lagged behind their class year group (OECD 2005). Of the sample

of students, 10 per cent had used computers for less than a year, and their average score was well below the OECD average. Almost three out of four students in the OECD countries frequently used a computer at home, but only 44 per cent did so at school.

Although the number of students with regular access to a computer is rising, the picture is patchy, even across the relatively wealthy countries of the OECD (see figure 16.11). In 2012, around 96 per cent of fifteen-year-olds in the OECD countries had access to a computer at home, but only 72 per cent used a laptop, tablet or desktop machine in school (OECD 2015: 3). Nonetheless, this was a major rise from 2003, when just 44 per cent had school access. The vision of classrooms of children learning exclusively through individual computers has not yet come to pass and, in fact, the 'classroom without walls' still looks some way off.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, although schools were closed, many still provided online learning packages for home-tutoring or selfdirected study. Yet, in the UK, this highlighted the fact that many disadvantaged students did not have laptops or reliable, fast broadband at home, thus emphasizing the digital divide. Some questioned whether online learning could match classroom teaching, as teachers can 'pick up so much more from an in-the-flesh encounter than via an internet connection, from whether a child properly understands what they're being taught to whether they're paying attention' (Morrison 2020). As the lockdown measures began to ease, both government and parents expressed the view that online learning was no substitute for getting children back into schools, stressing that classrooms promoted more effective learning and were essential for good mental health, social development and building relationships.
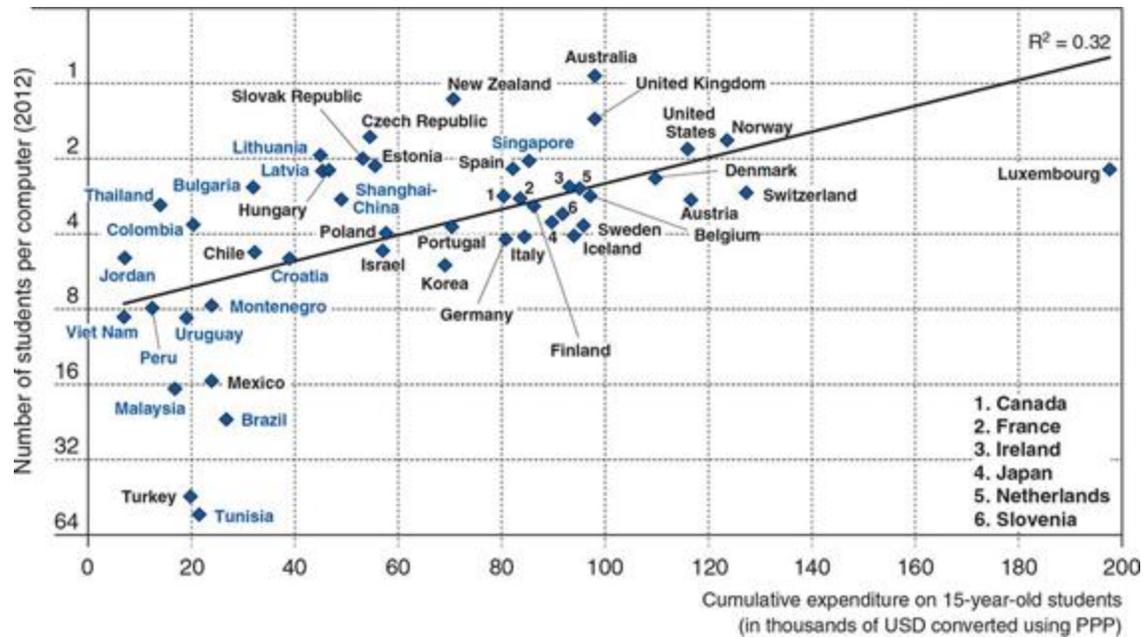
Figure 16.11 Number of computers available to students and expenditure on education, 2010

Notes: The horizontal axis reports the cumulative expenditure by educational institutions per student from age 6 to 15, inequivalent USD converted using PPPf or GDP. Data for most countries refer to 2010.

Source: OECD (2015: 148).

Does the introduction of ICT into school classrooms improve student performance and results? The research evidence to date is, at best, mixed. Moderate computer use in school seems to correlate with better learning outcomes than no computer use, but very frequent use leads to worse outcomes. The suggestion is that intensive adoption of computers and ICT in the classroom produces an imbalance rather than continuous improvement, and new technology can be a distraction from the human engagement that is necessary for promoting deep learning. Increasing access to computing also fails to bridge educational divisions between advantaged and disadvantaged students. Indeed, the OECD argues that focusing on basic literacy and numeracy would be more beneficial than increasing funding for technological devices in classrooms.

The next stage may be the move to make use of artificial intelligence, robotics and machine learning – this last involving algorithms that are capable of sifting large amounts of data in order to make decisions and

perform work tasks (Selwyn 2019: 4). And though we are probably a long way from installing robot teachers to replace humans, if education is defined in terms of the acquisition of new knowledge, insights and skills, then all of these can be facilitated online and by digital technologies and devices. On the other hand, there are some aspects of conventional education systems that it would be difficult to replicate through pure recourse to digital technologies. As we saw earlier in the discussion of the hidden curriculum, schools and other educational settings actually perform other functions such as inculcating discipline and learning norms of punctuality. This means that it is not enough simply to acknowledge the technical possibilities of digital technology; we also have to understand what Selwyn (2017: 7) calls 'the social world of education' and how this relates to the wider social and economic context.

Global society 16.2 The lifelong learning environment

New technologies and the rise of the knowledge economy are transforming traditional ideas about work and education. The pace of technological change is creating a much more rapid turnover of jobs than was once the case. Training and the attainment of qualifications is now occurring throughout people's lives rather than just in the early years, as mid-career professionals are choosing to update their skills through continuing education programmes and internet-based learning. Many employers now allow workers to participate in on-the-job training as a way of enhancing loyalty and improving the company skills base.

As societies continue to change, the traditional beliefs and institutions that underpin it are also undergoing transformation. The idea of schooling as the structured transmission of knowledge within formal institutions is giving way to a broader notion of 'learning' in a diversity of settings and at different times. The shift from 'education' to 'learning' is not inconsequential. Learners are active, curious social actors who can derive insights from a multiplicity of sources. Learners acquire skills and knowledge through many types of encounter – with friends and neighbours, at seminars and museums, in conversations at the local pub, through the internet and other media, and so forth.

The shift in emphasis towards lifelong learning can already be seen within schools themselves, where there is a growing number of opportunities for pupils to learn outside the confines of the classroom. The boundaries between schools and the outside world are breaking down, not only via cyberspace but in the physical world as well. 'Service learning', for example, has become a mainstay of many American secondary schools. As part of their graduation requirements, pupils devote a certain amount of time to volunteer work in the community. Partnerships with local businesses have also become commonplace in many countries,

fostering interaction and mentor relationships between adult professionals and pupils.

The University of the Third Age (U3A) encourages retirees to pursue their interests and to continue their learning into later life – the 'third age'.

Lifelong learning should play a key role in the move towards a knowledge society. Not only is it essential to a well-trained, motivated workforce, but learning should also be seen in relation to wider human values (Longworth 2003). Learning is both a means and an end to the development of a rounded and autonomous self-education in the service of self-development and self-understanding. There is nothing utopian in this idea, which reflects the humanistic ideals of education developed by educational philosophers. An example already in existence is the international 'university of the third age' (U3A), which provides retired people with the opportunity to educate themselves as they choose, developing whatever interests they care to follow.

Opportunities and obstacles for online HE

The Open University in the UK pioneered the use of television in distance learning. Its programmes were broadcast by the BBC in the early morning and late at night. Students combined these with written materials, work by correspondence, meetings with a personal tutor, and summer courses with other students on campus. In this way high-quality degree courses could be accessed from home, and sometimes at work, without having to attend a physical campus. The OU opened in 1971 and, having added the internet to its range of delivery methods, has become the UK's largest university, though it remains committed to a mix of encounters with students. Today many, perhaps most, universities offer some distance learning courses, which depend on the internet for email communication, chatrooms, online assessment or web-based course materials such as podcasts and videos.

The internet now appears to be transforming education in an even more profound way than television did. Online HE was pioneered in the USA by the University of Phoenix. Founded in 1989, this is a private institution that delivers courses of study mainly over the internet, though it does deliver teaching on traditional campuses too. The university introduced innovative 'group mailboxes' to substitute for physical classrooms, and students could post their work in an 'electronic classroom' which they could access at any hour of the day or night.

The university's initial remit was to admit only students who were over twenty-three years of age and employed at a workplace. Both the structure and the content of its offerings target adult professionals who want new skills and qualifications but need to complete this in a way

that does not conflict with their existing lives. The University of Phoenix is in fact a 'for-profit' institution owned since 1994 by a corporation called Apollo Education Group. A decade after its creation, the university was making an average profit of US$12.8 million a quarter.

However, all was not well. Questions were raised over the quality of the courses on offer, the university had the highest rate of student loan defaults in the USA, and, in 2008, just 9 per cent of its full-time undergraduates had actually graduated within six years. By 2010 enrolments were falling, down from a peak of around 600,000 to just 140,000 in 2017. At that stage the university was also under investigation for its business and marketing practices and was bought by Apollo Global Management, a private equity group (Tikkanen 2019). Yet it is unlikely that the online nature of the university inevitably led to its decline. Phoenix's co-founder argued that it lost its way when it broadened its enrolment from adult workers to anyone holding a high school diploma (Murphy 2013). Online distance learning still offers the potential to integrate higher education into the existing lives of workers rather than the other way round.

The flexibility and convenience of [internet-based learning](#) cannot be denied, but many remain sceptical of the approach. Can online education really be a substitute for face-to-face learning in a truly interactive environment with other students and teachers? Will future generations of learners be little more than networks of anonymous students known only by their online user names? Is online HE best suited to skills-oriented, practical studies and, if so, will it undermine the importance of abstract reasoning and learning 'for learning's sake'?

Globalization and technological advancement have also enabled the creation of a global market in higher education and the logical development of the Massive Open Online Course, or MOOC. These are online courses which are available to anyone, usually without charge, and could potentially lead to very large online learning communities. Registering for a MOOC may or may not lead to accredited qualifications, depending on the individual. Klobas et al. (2015: 4) report that an early MOOC from the University of Manitoba in 2008 attracted 2,200 participants, with just twenty-four people enrolled for

university credits. And for advocates this is a key feature of MOOCs, the potential for anyone, regardless of prior educational experience or qualifications, to engage with learning materials in their own time and in their own way. Perhaps this is the kind of development that Ivan Illich had in mind when he advocated the deschooling of society.

Although higher education has always had an international dimension – thanks to overseas students, cross-national research projects and international scholarly conferences – radical new opportunities are emerging for collaboration among students, academics and educational institutions scattered round the globe. Through internet-based learning, MOOCs and 'e-universities', participation in learning communities, education and qualifications are becoming increasingly accessible. Credentials, certificates and degrees can now be acquired outside the world of physical classrooms and traditional educational establishments, and a range of competing institutions and companies are entering the global education market.

Even conventional universities are taking steps to turn themselves into 'e-universities'. Consortia of institutions are sharing academic resources, research facilities, teaching staff and students online. Universities around the world acknowledge the benefits of these partnerships with other institutions whose offerings complement their own. And, as scholarship and technological innovation proliferate, it is impossible for even the most elite institutions to stay on top of advances in all disciplines. But through online partnerships they can pool their expertise and make it available to students and researchers within the consortium. Students in Milan or Glasgow, for example, can access online libraries in Sydney and Copenhagen, email specialized academic staff to have questions addressed, and collaborate on research projects in multiple geographically dispersed locations.

Conclusion

The digital revolution in communications promises radical change and fabulous possibilities for education, while enthusiasts claim that the strength of digital technology lies in its ability to draw people together and open up new opportunities. Schools in Asia and Africa that are lacking textbooks and qualified teachers can benefit from online communications. Distance learning programmes and collaboration with colleagues overseas could be the key to overcoming poverty and disadvantage. When technology is put in the hands of smart, creative people, it is argued, the potential is limitless.

And yet digital technology may also reinforce existing educational inequalities. As the global economy becomes increasingly informationand knowledge-based, there is a real danger that the gap between the information rich and the information poor will reinforce existing inequalities between the Global North and the Global South. Many developing countries are struggling with internationally high levels of illiteracy and lack the infrastructure to enable widespread access to the new technologies.

As we have seen throughout the chapter, national education systems have long carried an enormous weight of expectation that, somehow, schooling can make good on successive governments' ideals and promises of equal opportunities. Yet, time and again, empirical sociological studies report that education systems are not ivory towers that sit outside of the social structures of society. Instead, they are part of longstanding processes of cultural reproduction that reproduce social inequalities and patterns of advantage and disadvantage. Neither formal schooling nor the digital revolution in communications is likely significantly to undermine or challenge embedded social inequalities. This may not be a particularly optimistic conclusion, but the first job of sociology is to present the world as it really is, not how we would like it to be. And it is only from this starting point that a realistic assessment of political platforms and educational policy proposals can be made.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. Functionalism is closely linked to ideas of primary and secondary socialization. How have functionalist ideas of education and schooling been criticized?

2. Explain what is meant by a 'correspondence theory' of schooling and the 'hidden curriculum'. Which aspects of schooling do Marxist theories struggle to explain?

3. What is meant by 'cultural reproduction'? Illustrate this with examples from the work of Willis, Mac an Ghaill and Bernstein.

4. Pierre Bourdieu's work on forms of 'capital', 'fields' and 'habitus' have been very influential. Provide some examples of how these ideas help us to understand education systems.

5. How has the pattern of gendered outcomes in schools changed over time? Why do girls now outperform boys in most subjects?

6. Which minority ethnic groups do least well in the UK education system and which do best? How can such inequalities and differences be explained?

7. How would you characterize the *global* pattern of literacy and illiteracy? List three main factors that lead to low levels of literacy.

8. How would you characterize the development of schooling in England and Wales since 1945? Is there a direction to the changes or are they random, based on alternating Conservative and Labour government policies?

9. Higher education has expanded significantly since the Second World War, and many societies now have mass higher education with large student numbers. What issues and problems has this expansion produced?

10. How is the digital revolution transforming higher education? What evidence is there that the physical university is giving way to online environments?

🔎 [Research in practice](#)

Pierre Bourdieu's work on forms of exchangeable capital has served mainly to explain how social inequalities of class, disability, ethnicity and gender are reproduced over time. But it remains the case that some individuals have managed to overcome the structural barriers which seem to trap most of their peers. How do they do this? What strategies do they employ and what mechanisms exist which enable such individuals to succeed?

The paper below tackles this question using Bourdieu's key ideas to fill in the gaps in his broader theoretical position. Read it and answer the questions that follow.

> Crul, M., Schneider, J., Keskiner, E., and Lelie, F. (2016) 'The Multiplier Effect: How the Accumulation of Cultural and Social Capital Explains Steep Upward Social Mobility of Children of Low-Educated Immigrants', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(2): 321–38.
>
> 1. What is the research question here? What problem are the researchers trying to solve?
>
> 2. This is a comparative study. What are the elements being compared?
>
> 3. In the education sector, what exclusionary mechanisms did respondents identify and how did they overcome these?
>
> 4. The authors introduce the concept of the 'multiplier effect' to explain how individuals climbed to successful positions in education (and other professions). What is the multiplier effect and how is Bourdieu's concept of capital used in this article?
>
> 5. How did the national contexts in France, the Netherlands, Germany and Sweden affect success or failure among the survey participants? Which context was most conducive to success in the field of education and why?

⚙ **<u>Thinking it through</u>**

Since at least the 1950s, education systems in the developed societies have operated on a meritocratic model which promises fairness and equal opportunity. Moore (2015: 201–4) points to some assumptions of this model:

- modern societies require increasing levels of skill and knowledge;
- education systems identify and develop a range of abilities in young people;
- schools award qualifications that are used by employers in selecting employees;
- employers take on workers who are best suited to the jobs on offer;
- if all of the above are in place, then there is a broad equality of opportunity and people can feel fairly treated.

But Moore also says: 'There are, however, a number of problems with this model, the biggest of which is that it does not work!' Drawing on evidence and theories from this chapter, discuss which aspects of the meritocratic model above have not materialized and why. If the meritocratic model is not working, what changes should governments make to their education systems?

⭐ <u>Society in the arts</u>

1 Watch the 2009 film *Precious* (directed by Lee Daniels) and/or read the 1996 novel on which it is based, *Push*, by Sapphire (Chicago: Alfred A. Knopf), retitled *Precious* from 2009. The novel/film follows the life of Claireece Precious Jones, a sixteen-year-old black girl living in an American ghetto. 'Precious' is the victim of parental sexual, physical and emotional abuse and faces multiple disadvantages which severely restrict her educational development and life chances. The film follows her as she tries to change her circumstances.

Write a 1,000-word review of the film. You should discuss events and issues in the film using sociological concepts such as class, poverty, ethnicity, gender, and intersectionality and theories such as Marxism, interactionism, feminism and cultural reproduction. Your conclusion should reflect on what fictional representations such as this, based on the life of a single individual, might add to existing sociological work on education and disadvantage.

2 There are many films and novels which portray troubled teenagers whose lives are turned around by a special teacher who takes them under their wing. Such stories help to promote the notion that schooling is the route to happiness and fulfilment. However, as this chapter has shown, there is a large body of sociological work which demonstrates that schooling also reproduces inequalities and can be restrictive just as much as it is enabling.

Watch Davis Guggenheim's 2010 documentary *Waiting for 'Superman'* with this thought in mind. The film follows several students as they try to get into much sought-after places in 'charter' schools in the USA – schools that receive state funding but also have a large measure of organizational independence. What are the main criticisms of the US public education system made in the film? Which of these criticisms finds support from sociological theories and critiques of schooling described in the chapter? What solutions does the film have to offer and how realistic are these?

Now watch a counter-documentary – *The Inconvenient Truth about Waiting for Superman* – which was made by the Grassroots Education Movement as a critique of Guggenheim's film, available at http://gemnyc.org/our-film/. This documentary sets out to defend public education from business and political interests that, the makers argue, seek to undermine and privatize education. List the main criticisms of Guggenheim's film. How far do you agree with these? Why would the potential privatization of education exacerbate the intersecting social inequalities of class, race and ethnicity? Does the 'Grassroots' analysis fit into any of the sociological perspectives discussed in this chapter?

Further reading

There are numerous textbooks covering the sociology of education, among which are Tomas Boronski and Nasima Hassan's (2015) *Sociology of Education* (London: Sage) and Sharon Gewirtz and Alan Cribb's (2009) *Understanding Education: A Sociological Perspective* (Cambridge: Polity). Both are reliable and comprehensive introductions to this field.

The sociology of education is a broad, well-established field, so consulting an edited collection on specific topics is a good idea. To this end you could try Michael W. Apple, Stephen J. Ball and Luis Armando Gandin's (2011) *The Routledge International Handbook of the Sociology of Education* (London: Routledge), which contains a range of subjects, from theories to masculinities and inequalities. *Contemporary Debates in the Sociology of Education* (2013), edited by Rachel Brooks, Mark McCormack and Kalwant Bhopal (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), is a set of essays covering many key issues.

On the transformation of UK education, see Ken Jones's (2015) *Education in Britain: 1944 to the Present* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity). For a global perspective, see Hugh Lauder, Phillip Brown, Jo-Anne Dillabough and A. H. Halsey's (2006) edited collection *Education, Globalization and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), which includes classic and contemporary readings. The changing university is well handled in F. Bryce McCluskey and Melanie Lynn Winter's (2012) *The Idea of the Digital University: Ancient Traditions, Disruptive Technologies and the Battle for the Soul of Higher Education* (Washington, DC: Westphalia Press).

For a collection of original readings on social institutions, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Sociosite on education – lots of links to distance learning resources, not all of them sociological:
www.sociosite.net/topics/education.php

The Global Campaign for Education – lots of useful education resources from this campaign:
www.campaignforeducation.org/

UNESCO education homepage – useful international comparisons and global issues:
http://unesco.org/education/

OECD education – useful resources and archived OECD surveys and reports:
www.oecd.org/education/

The Sutton Trust – UK foundation that looks at education and social mobility:
www.suttontrust.com/

Lifelong Learning – a UK site promoting this concept:
www.lifelonglearning.co.uk/

CHAPTER 17

WORK AND EMPLOYMENT
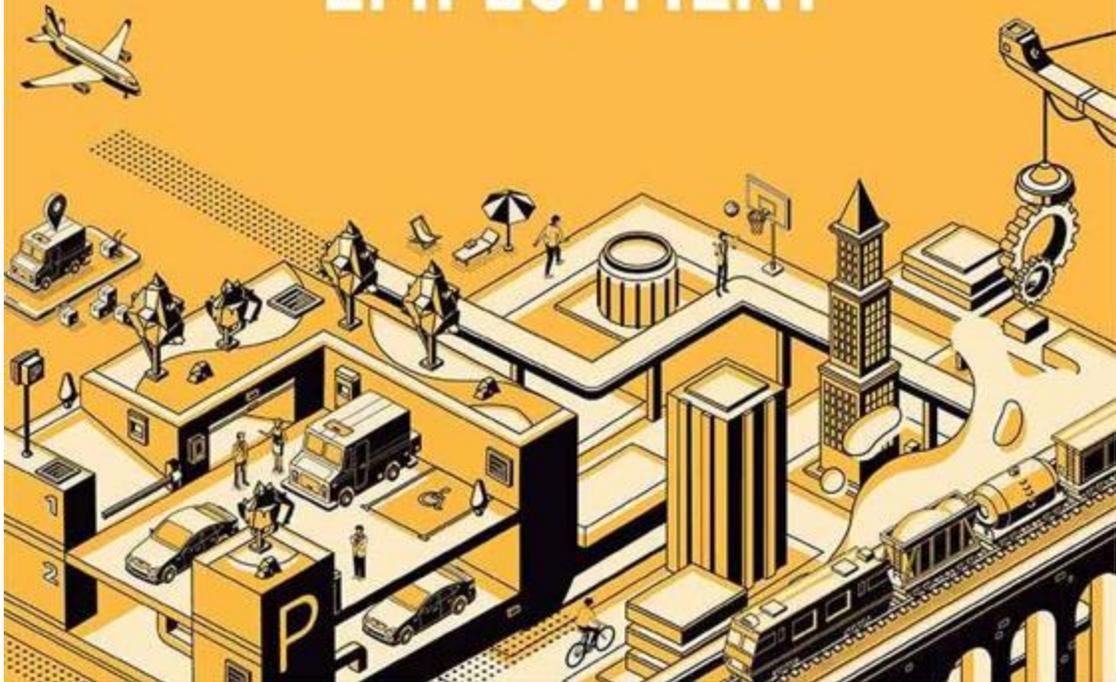
CONTENTS

From quite early in the Covid-19 pandemic in the UK, people around the country went into the streets every Thursday at 8 pm to 'Clap for Carers', in appreciation of the commitment of healthcare staff and care workers.

Most sociology teachers have, at some point, carried out an exercise with their students that asks them to imagine some global catastrophe during which society, as we know it, has collapsed and needs to be rebuilt. They are given a list of occupations and asked to rank them in order of importance for this crucial task. A second list then shows the average pay levels for a range of occupations, ranked from highest to the lowest. The two lists are then compared. Without a societal collapse, how are society's financial rewards currently distributed and does this distribution match the social significance ranking of jobs in the second list? If not, why not? This is essentially a thought experiment designed to get students thinking about why many workers in socially important roles are poorly paid, while other, 'less important' work is much more lucrative. Following the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019–20, this thought experiment now has a real-world reference point.

During the so-called lockdowns imposed by many governments to slow the spread of the virus, some groups of 'key' or 'critical' workers were

exempted from restrictions on movement, as the roles they performed were considered 'essential'. The UK's list (DfE 2020a) of essential workers included healthcare workers, such as nurses, doctors, midwives, and care workers, producers and distributors of medical supplies, childcare workers, teaching and support staff, funeral directors, broadcasters and journalists, those involved in delivering social security benefits, workers in food processing, production and delivery (including lorry drivers), police, defence civilian staff, border control staff, postal workers, waste disposal workers and utility company workers. The list is not exhaustive, but it does give an idea of which groups of workers kept society moving, when some 8 million other workers were paid 80 per cent of their wages by the state to 'stay home and stay safe' and millions more were able to do their work from home via the internet. Many key workers are employed in some of the lowest-paid types of work with the fewest in-work benefits, and many, such as care home and domiciliary care workers, are paid at or just above the minimum wage.

One survey of key workers during the pandemic (Farquharson et al. 2020) found that they were more likely to be women (64 per cent versus 43 per cent in other occupations). In normal times, 35 per cent of all female workers work in what are considered 'key occupations'. On average, key workers were also paid 9 per cent lower than other workers and one-third earned less than £10 per hour, lower than the government's target for a National Living Wage. There were also large differences within the key worker group. Those in the food sector earned 30 per cent less than the median key worker, while those in journalism and the justice system earned far more than the median.

Key workers were lauded by politicians and the public alike for their courage and commitment during a once-in-a-century health crisis, yet this crisis also brought to the fore the real-world disparity between their crucial roles and key workers' pay and status. It remains to be seen whether this group of workers will be better rewarded as a result.

The world of work is very diverse and highly complex, and many factors combine to determine which occupational groups are able to lay claim successfully to the highest rewards. Qualifications, skill levels, the ability of the group to control its membership, the level of unionization,

a shortage of suitably qualified people, the profitability of the sector and discrimination by class, race and ethnicity, and gender are some of the factors involved. In this chapter we look at the world of work, with a particular emphasis on changes since the 1970s in the industrialized societies of the Global North.

We start with the concept of work itself, which has varied forms and meanings. From here we move on to look at the management of work and organizations. The world of work is always in flux, and the chapter discusses some broad shifts in the way that production and consumption have changed over the last fifty years or so, including the emergence of increasingly flexible forms of work and their impact on people's working conditions. The feminization of the workforce, one of the most profound changes in working patterns, follows from this, and the section ends with debates on automation, skills, robotics and artificial intelligence. In the final section, we outline the emergence and character of the so-called gig economy and the increasing levels of insecurity and job instability it brings. We end with recent trends in unemployment and the economic and social consequences of being out of work.

What is work?

We often think of 'work' as equivalent to having a paid job, as is implied by being 'out of work', but this is, in fact, an oversimplified view. Unpaid labour, such as housework, looking after grandchildren, DIY or repairing your own car, is an important aspect of many people's lives that makes an enormous contribution to society and may also be considered to be 'work'. Voluntary work for charities, communities and other organizations is also a form of 'work' that has an important social role, often filling in the gaps left by the state and commercial service providers, contributing to the enhancement of the quality of life. For sociologists, it is helpful to try to define what we mean by 'work'.

Definitions and types of work

We can initially define work, whether paid or unpaid, as the carrying out of tasks requiring the expenditure of mental and physical effort, which has as its objective the production of goods and services that cater to human needs. An occupation, or job, is work that is done in exchange for a regular wage or salary. Today, work is the basis of the economy, and the economic system consists of institutions that provide for the production and distribution of goods and services. Grint and Nixon (2016: 9) note that this definition of work is perhaps the most widely used, and that 'most sociological accounts of "work" actually concern themselves with paid employment.' This chapter focuses primarily on paid employment and the making of livings while also covering other forms of 'work' that have attracted sociological interest.

Budd (2011) discusses ten different ways of thinking about work, though there may be even more than that as 'work' has many meanings in social life. For some, work is 'a curse', something that is necessary but unpleasant, while for others it is a central source of satisfaction and fulfilment, part of their identity and a route to personal freedom. Several characteristics of work are important:

1. *Money* A wage is the main resource on which people depend to meet their needs. Without an income, day-to-day life is almost

inconceivable.

2. *Activity level* Work provides a basis for the acquisition and exercise of skills. Even where work is routine, it offers a structured environment in which a person's energies may be absorbed.

3. *Variety* Work provides access to new contexts. In the working environment people may enjoy doing something different from home chores.

4. *Temporal structure* For people in regular employment, the day is usually organized around the rhythms of work. Those who are out of work frequently complain of boredom and apathy, and there were many anecdotal reports of people finding it difficult to fill their days during the forced absence from work due to the Covid-19 partial economic shutdown.

5. *Social contacts* The work environment provides friendships and opportunities to participate in shared activities and involvement, including the activities of trade unions. Separated from work settings, a person's circle of friends and acquaintances is likely to dwindle.

6. *Personal identity* Work is usually valued for the sense of stable social identity it offers. Self-esteem is often bound up with the economic contribution people make to the maintenance of their household.

For most adults, work occupies a larger part of our lives than any other activity. We often associate the notion of work with drudgery, but this is far from the whole story. Being gainfully employed is important for maintaining self-esteem and providing the structure for a cycle of daily activities. Whatever our personal experience of work, sociologically we must start with the recognition that, above all else, 'work' is a social relationship and, as such, has to be placed within its social context if we are to understand it fully (Strangleman 2015: 137). Many types of work just do not conform to orthodox categories of 'paid employment'. Work carried out in the informal economy, for example, is not recorded in any direct way in official employment statistics but still brings an income and social status.

The term informal economy refers to transactions outside the sphere of regular employment, involving sometimes the exchange of cash for services provided but often the direct exchange of goods or services, such as those making money from selling goods through online auction sites such as Alibaba and eBay. Many forms of sex work, for example, take place within the informal sector of the economy and do not conform to standard norms of paid employment. However, someone who mends your leaking pipe and is paid in cash without a receipt is also working 'informally', while others exchange stolen goods with friends or associates in return for other favours. The informal economy includes not only 'hidden' cash transactions but many forms of self-provisioning, which people carry on inside and outside the home. Do-it-yourself activities, for instance, provide goods and services which would otherwise have to be purchased (Gershuny and Miles 1983).

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> Consider the six characteristics of work listed above. Do we really need work to provide these things? What problems are experienced in relation to these aspects by unemployed or retired people and those who just do not take paid work?

If we take a *global* view of the experience of work, there are large differences between the Global North and the Global South. One major difference is that agriculture remains a significant source of employment in many countries of the Global South but employs a tiny proportion of workers in the industrialized countries. Clearly, the lived experience of paid work is very different in the rural settings of the Global South and the expanded service sector in the Global North. Similarly, while a series of employment laws in the North have protected the working hours, health, safety and rights of workers over many years, sweatshops still operate in the less tightly regulated environments of the Global South (Louie 2001).

Employment patterns are also very different across the world. The ILO (2018: 13–15) estimates that some 2 billion people around the world work in the informal economy, covering almost 86 per cent of employment in Africa, 68 per cent in Asia and the Pacific, 68 per cent in the Arab States, 40 per cent in the Americas and just 25 per cent in Europe and Central Asia. In the Global North, the informal economy is relatively small in comparison with the formal paid sector, but the pattern is reversed in the Global South, where informal work is far larger than the formal sector. Though such informal work is crucial for individuals, government spending plans are constrained by the loss of tax revenues and, some argue, economic development is made more difficult. As the ILO (ibid: 14) suggests, 'The level of socio-economic development is positively correlated to formality.'

Having a paid job is important, but the category of 'work' stretches much more widely to include unpaid labour such as housework. Housework, which has traditionally been carried out mainly by women, is usually unpaid, even though it is often very hard and exhausting work. It is worth exploring housework in more detail through Ann Oakley's classic studies of housework (see 'Classic studies' 17.1).

One of the main questions of interest to sociologists is how the growing involvement of women in the labour market has affected the domestic division of labour. If the quantity of domestic work has not diminished, but fewer women are now full-time housewives, it follows that the domestic affairs of households must be arranged rather differently today.

[Classic studies 17.1](#) Ann Oakley on housework and the housewife role

The research problem

Before the 1970s, sociological studies of work focused almost exclusively on paid employment in the public sphere. But this ignored the domestic sphere and simply assumed that what happened within families was a private matter. Such ingrained assumptions were thoroughly shaken by second-wave feminism, which challenged the idea that personal life was not a sociological matter. But what is the relationship between paid work and domestic tasks and why has the latter been seen as an exclusively female preserve? Ann Oakley explored these issues in two related books published in 1974, *The Sociology of Housework* and *Housewife*.

Oakley's explanation

Oakley (1974b) argued that housework, in its current form in the West, came into existence with the separation of the home from the workplace. With industrialization, 'work' took place away from the home and family, and 'home' became a place of consumption and leisure. Domestic work then became largely invisible as 'real work' was increasingly defined as that which receives a direct wage. Housework was then seen as the 'natural' domain of women, while the realm of 'real work' outside the home was reserved for men.

Before the inventions and facilities provided by industrialization, work in the household was hard and exacting. The weekly wash, for example, was a heavy and demanding task. The introduction of hot and cold running water into homes eliminated many time-consuming tasks; previously, water had to be carried to the home and heated there, as it still is in many parts of the Global South. The piping of electricity and gas made coal and wood stoves obsolete, and chores such as the regular chopping of wood, the carrying of coal and constant cleaning of the stove were largely eliminated.

Yet, Oakley argues, the average amount of time spent on domestic work by women has not declined markedly with labour-saving equipment. The amount of time spent on housework by British women not in paid employment remained quite constant as homes had to be cleaned more thoroughly than before. Household appliances eliminated some heavier chores, but new tasks were created in their place. Time spent on childcare, stocking up the home with purchases, and meal preparation all increased. This unpaid domestic labour is of enormous significance to the economy. For instance, it has been estimated that housework accounts for between 25 and 40 per cent of the wealth created in the industrialized countries. One UK study of time use estimated that, if housework were paid, it would be worth £700 billion to the economy (ONS 2002). Oakley argued that such unacknowledged and unrewarded domestic work props up the rest of the economy, providing free services on which many of those in paid work depend.

Women's full-time occupation with domestic tasks can also be very isolating, alienating and lacking in intrinsic satisfaction. Housewives in Oakley's study (1974a) found domestic tasks monotonous and had difficulty escaping the self-imposed psychological pressure to meet standards which they established for their work. Because housework is not paid and brings no direct monetary reward, women gain satisfaction and psychological rewards from meeting standards of cleanliness and order, which feel like externally imposed rules. Unlike male workers, though, women cannot leave their 'workplace' at the end of the day.

Although some of the women interviewed said they were 'their own boss' at home, Oakley argued this was illusory. While men work fixed hours and avoid additional domestic duties, women's extra domestic duties, such as caring for sick children, partners or older relatives, means that their working hours are increased. Hence, men tend to divide work and leisure quite sharply and see extra duties as impinging on their protected leisure time, but for women this makes little sense, as they do not experience such a clear division. Paid work brings an income, which in turn creates an unequal

power relationship, making housewives dependent on male partners for economic survival.

Critical points

Some critics took issue with Oakley's argument that patriarchy rather than social class was the most significant factor in explaining the gendered division of household labour. This neglected important differences between working- and middle-class households in relation to decision-making and sharing of resources. Recent social change has also raised the question of whether working women really do carry a greater 'double burden' than men in having to combine paid work with housework.

The amount of housework carried out by men has been increasing, if slowly. If we measure the *total* amount of work (paid and domestic) carried out by men and women, then a real movement towards more equality seems to be taking place, though society's adaptation to more working women has lagged behind. Sullivan's (2000) study of UK time-budget data found that, since the late 1950s, women's share of domestic duties had fallen by about one-fifth across all social class groups, and, the more women worked in paid employment, the lower was their time-commitment to domestic tasks. Was Oakley too pessimistic about the prospects for real change in gender relations?

Contemporary significance

Ann Oakley's work was immensely influential in the 1970s and 1980s when feminist studies were opening up the sociological study of gender and household relations. And, despite the legitimate points made by critics, her ideas remain important. Even critics concede that working women still continue do more housework than their male partners and husbands. This supports Oakley's contention that Western societies have deeply embedded attitudes and assumptions about women's 'proper place' within the domestic sphere. More recently, Crompton et al. (2005) found that, as global economic pressures increase competition and push firms to demand more commitment from their (mostly male) workers, the process of equalization noted by Sullivan (2000) and others has

'stalled'. Attitudes towards the domestic division of labour *were* becoming less traditional, but the real *practices* within households had reverted to a more traditional pattern.

Oakley's research did much to help convince sociologists that understanding societies and social change must involve an analysis of relations within domestic situations every bit as much as those in the public sphere of work and paid employment.

See [chapter 15](#), 'Families and Intimate Relationships', for an extended discussion of the domestic division of household labour.

THINKING CRITICALLY

In your own or your family's experience, which aspects have seen the most change – housework, childcare, paying bills/financial management or looking after sick relatives? Which aspects have been most resistant to change, and why should this be?

The social organization of work

Work in industrialized societies, as Durkheim discussed in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1984 [1893]), is characterized by a highly complex division of labour, with an enormous number of different occupations in which people are able to specialize. Before industrialization, non-agricultural work entailed the mastery of a craft, and craft skills were learned through a lengthy apprenticeship. Craft workers normally carried out all aspects of the production process, from beginning to end. For example, a metalworker making a plough would forge the iron, shape it and assemble the implement.

With the rise of industrial production, most traditional craftwork disappeared, to be replaced by specialized skills that form part of larger

production processes. Industrialization also saw a shift in the main location of work. With the growth of workshops and factories enabling the use of large pieces of machinery operating on electricity and coal, work and home life became increasingly separated. Factories became the focal points of industrial development, and the [mass production](#) of goods began to eclipse small-scale artisanship based in the home, exemplified in the Fordist system discussed below.

In the 1950s, expectations for girls centred around marriage and home life. Despite huge strides for women moving into paid employment, men in opposite-sex relationships remain resistant to the equal sharing of household chores.

The contrast in the division of labour between industrialized and other types of society is extraordinary. Even in the largest pre-industrial societies, there were no more than twenty or thirty major craft trades, together with specialized roles such as merchant, soldier and priest. In modern societies there are literally thousands of distinct occupations,

which implies a much tighter <u>economic interdependence</u>, as people depend on an immense number of other workers stretching right across the world for products and services. With few exceptions, the vast majority of people in modern societies do not produce the food they eat, the houses they live in or the material goods they consume.

Early sociologists were interested in the social consequences of such an extensive division of labour. Karl Marx argued that modern industry would reduce human labour to a series of dull, uninteresting 'work' tasks. According to Marx, the capitalist division of labour alienates human beings from their own labour, a key aspect of their sense of self. For Marx, <u>alienation</u> refers to the loss of control over the production process, often leading to feelings of indifference or hostility to work and the overall framework of industrial production. Industrial workers have little control over their work, how it is performed and for how long. Thus, work appears as something alien to them, an intrinsically unsatisfying aspect of life that must be carried out in order to survive.

Durkheim held a more optimistic outlook about the division of labour, though he also acknowledged its potentially harmful effects. According to Durkheim, the specialization of roles would strengthen social solidarity through the multidirectional relationships of production and consumption. Durkheim saw this arrangement as a highly functional one, although he was aware that solidarity could be disrupted if economic change occurred too rapidly.

You may find it useful to look at the overview of Durkheim's and Marx's ideas in <u>chapter 1</u>, 'What is Sociology?'

Of course, the occupational structure of the industrialized countries has changed substantially since the end of the nineteenth century. At the start of the twentieth century the labour market was dominated by 'blue-collar' manufacturing work, but over time the balance shifted towards white-collar positions in the service sector. In 1900, more than

three-quarters of the employed population of the UK were in manual (blue-collar) work. But, by the middle of the century, manual workers made up less than two-thirds of the working population, and by 2018 manufacturing jobs accounted for just 8 per cent of employment and 10 per cent of total economic output (Rhodes 2020: 3).

There are several reasons for this shift. The continual introduction of labour-saving machinery, culminating in the spread of information technology over the last thirty-five years, is one key reason. Most technological advances replace human labour with machines, even in farming and agriculture, which reduces the size of the workforce. Second, the decline of manufacturing jobs in the Global North was especially rapid from the mid-1970s, as transnational corporations moved much of their production to regions of the world where they could take advantage of much cheaper labour costs and relatively unregulated economic environments. Third, the development of welfare states after 1945 generated large bureaucracies associated with healthcare and the administration of welfare and public services, which created many service-sector jobs.

As consumerism became a more significant part of life, many service-sector jobs were also created in advertising and the creative industries which underpin and sustain consumer demand. In the 1960s, some sociologists were already theorizing the emergence of a post-industrial society, which meant fewer huge factories with large workforces. A consequence of the shift to services was therefore a less favourable environment for workers' collective identities and collective action, and thus for trade unionism (Touraine 1971; Inglehart 1997).

For more on global production systems, see chapter 4, 'Globalization and Social Change'.

Trade unions in decline?

As manufacturing industry has shed workers, one consequence has been a reduction in the membership of trade unions. In the early development of modern industries, workers had no political rights and little influence over their conditions of work. Unions developed as a means of redressing this imbalance of power between workers and employers. Through collective organization, workers' influence was considerably increased, but it should be remembered that trade unions were primarily 'defensive' organizations, providing the means whereby workers could counter the overwhelming power of employers.

The post-1945 period witnessed a dramatic reversal in the position of unions in the industrialized economies. The period from 1950 to 1980 was a time of steady growth in union density and, by the late 1970s and early 1980s, over 50 per cent of the British workforce was unionized. Tomlinson (2019) shows that, in 1979, some 13 million workers were members of unions, but membership then fell into long-term decline, and by 2018 it was about half that at the 1979 peak, at 6.7 million. Of all those in employment in 2018, only 20.8 per cent were union members, and the bulk of these worked in the public sector. Tomlinson also notes that the long-term future of trade unionism is unclear as each new cohort of workers is now less likely to hold union membership than the previous one. So why was trade unionism so high in the 1960s and 1970s, and why has it declined?

High union density in the late twentieth century was common in Western countries for several reasons. First, strong working-class political parties created favourable conditions for labour organization. Second, bargaining between companies and trade unions was coordinated at the national level rather than in decentralized fashion at the local level. Third, unions rather than the state directly administered unemployment insurance, ensuring that workers who lost their jobs did not leave the labour movement. Countries in which some combination of these factors was present (but not all three) had lower rates of union density, between two-fifths to two-thirds of the working population.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

17.1 Industrial conflict and strikes

There have long been conflicts between workers and those in authority over them. Riots against conscription and high taxes and food riots at periods of harvest failure were common in urban areas of Europe in the eighteenth century and continued in some areas well into the nineteenth century. Traditional forms of confrontation were not just sporadic, irrational outbursts of violence: the threat or use of violence had the effect of limiting the price of grain and other essential foodstuffs (Rudé 1964; Booth 1977). Industrial conflict between workers and employers at first tended to follow these older patterns, but, today, we are more familiar with organized bargaining between workers and management. The tactic of striking has also been used recently by school students protesting the lack of rapid action on climate change, by staying away from schools on Fridays to demonstrate.

Strikes

A [strike](#) is a temporary stoppage of work by a group of employees in order to express a grievance or enforce a demand (Hyman 1984). All the components of this definition are important in separating strikes from other forms of opposition and conflict. A strike is temporary, since workers intend to return to the same job with the same employer. Where workers quit altogether, the term 'strike' is not appropriate. As a stoppage of work, a strike is distinguishable from an overtime ban or 'slowdown'. A group of workers has to be involved, because a strike involves *collective action*, not the response of one individual worker. That those involved are employees serves to separate strikes from protests such as may be conducted by tenants or students. Finally, a strike involves seeking to make known a grievance or to press a demand.

The strike is essentially a mechanism of power: a weapon of people who are relatively powerless in the workplace and whose lives are

affected by managerial decisions over which they have little or no control. It is usually a weapon of 'last resort' because workers on strike either receive no income or depend on union funds, which are limited.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Strikes have become less common today than they were in the late twentieth century. Why should this be the case? List some of the obstacles to workers deciding to take strike action.

Traditionally, manufacturing has been a stronghold for labour, whereas the service sector was more resistant to unionization. Hence, a decline in manufacturing work could be anticipated to lead to declining union membership. Several explanations are consistent with the fall in union density within as well as between industries. First, the recession in world economic activity, associated with high levels of unemployment, particularly during the 1980s, weakened the bargaining position of organized labour. Second, the increasing intensity of international competition, particularly from Far Eastern countries, where wages are lower than in the West, also weakened unions' bargaining power. Third, the rise to power of right-wing governments, such as the British Conservatives in 1979, saw an aggressive assault on trade unions, which were perceived as a brake on the policy of economic liberalization, now known as 'neo-liberalism'.

In the UK, unions came out second-best in several major disputes, notably the strike by the National Union of Mineworkers in 1984–5, which lasted a whole year. Yet this is not a typical example of strikes in the UK today, which tend to be disputes in the public sector around issues of pay, pensions and working conditions. For example, in 2014, the National Union of Teachers (NUT), Unison's health workers and three other unions voted in favour of strike action following the government's planned two-year pay freeze. The aim was to bring the government into negotiations to resolve a pay dispute. Also, in 2015–16, the government attempted to introduce a new contract for junior doctors in the NHS in England, but, following the breakdown of talks,

the British Medical Association (BMA) began the process of moving towards a series of short strikes by junior doctors.

The most important change for unionism has been an economic climate of historically high unemployment levels, a growth in part-time, flexible and zero-hours contracts (the lack of guaranteed minimum work hours) and an increasing divide between full-time, relatively secure jobs and insecure, poorly paid work. Perhaps the best example of the consequences of this divide is that, during and after the 2008 financial crisis, unions worked collaboratively with employers to negotiate reductions in hours and pay for their members rather than risking redundancies. This kind of pragmatism is characteristic of trade unionism across the private sector today, and though UK trade union membership reached a low-point of 6.23 million in 2016, by 2018 it had risen again to stand at 6.35 million. Reflecting the rise of service-sector employment, since 2003 the majority of trade union members have been women (DBEIS 2019: 1).

In the casualized sector of the economy, which includes workers employed in food delivery and taxi drivers who work as 'independent contractors' rather than employees (from platforms such as Deliveroo and Uber respectively), trade union organization is virtually absent. Yet even here there have been signs of collective action and nascent unionization.

Cant (2020) reports that, in 2016, Deliveroo attempted to change the way their independent delivery riders in London were paid, from an hourly rate of £7 with £1 per delivery to a £3.75 fee-per-delivery piece-wage that scrapped the hourly rate altogether. This would have been good for the firm but could have meant a pay cut for many of the workers. Hundreds of Deliveroo riders went on strike in protest, bringing chaos to the service across the city. A recently created trade union, the Independent Workers of Great Britain (IWGB, founded in 2012), raised money via crowdfunding to support the strikers, and Deliveroo backed down, agreeing to maintain the previous payment system for all existing workers, though new workers would still have to adopt the new piece-work payment method. It seems likely that, in the gig-economy sector, traditional trade union tactics such as strikes can

still be effective, but alongside new forms of organization appropriate for such a highly individualized and dispersed workforce.

The power of unions tends to become weaker during periods when unemployment is relatively high because members are fearful for their jobs and are less likely to support industrial action. But the trend towards [flexible production](#) and casualization has further weakened conventional trade unionism. Since the 1980s there have been many mergers of unions as they try to maintain their strength and influence, and they have worked hard to stabilize their position in a very difficult climate. Given the relatively weak status of workers in relation to employers, the collective strength afforded by trade unions is unlikely to disappear altogether.

Transforming the world of work

Since the 1970s there have been some major changes in the world of work. Manufacturing industries have seen a radical shift away from uniform mass production towards more flexible systems. The latter feed today's differentiated niche markets but also bring uncertainty for many workers. The switch to a service economy has also seen more women moving into work in a process known as the 'feminization of work'. Many younger women now have well-paid careers that were effectively closed to the previous generation, though people's experience of the feminization trend is by no means uniformly positive. Finally, this section looks at the recent and possible future impact of new forms of automation, robotics and artificial intelligence on the world of work and human skills.

Scientific management and Fordism

Adam Smith, one of the founders of modern economics, identified advantages that the division of labour provides in terms of increasing productivity. Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1991 [1776]) opens with a description of the division of labour in a pin factory. A person working alone could perhaps make twenty pins per day. By breaking down that worker's task into a number of simple operations, ten workers carrying out specialized tasks could collectively produce 48,000 pins per day. The rate of production per worker, in other words, is increased from twenty to 4,800 pins, each specialist operator producing 240 times more than when working alone.

More than a century later, these ideas became formalized in the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor (1865–1915), an American management consultant. Taylor's approach, known as 'scientific management', involved the detailed study of industrial processes, breaking them down into simple operations that could be precisely timed and organized. Taylorism was a system of production designed to maximize industrial output which also had a widespread impact on the organization of production and workplace politics. In particular,

Taylor's time-and-motion studies wrested control over knowledge of the production process from workers, placing it in the hands of management, thus eroding the basis on which craft workers maintained their autonomy (Braverman 1974). Taylorism has been widely associated with the deskilling and degradation of labour.

Taylorist principles were adopted by the industrialist Henry Ford (1863–1947). He designed his first car factory at Highland Park, Michigan, in 1908 to manufacture only one product – the Model T Ford – using specialized tools and machinery designed for speed, precision and simplicity of operation. One of Ford's significant innovations was the moving assembly line, said to have been inspired by Chicago slaughterhouses where animals were disassembled section by section on a moving line. Each worker on Ford's assembly line was assigned a specialized task, such as fitting the left-side door handles, as car bodies moved along the line. By 1929, when production of the Model T ceased, more than 15 million cars had been produced in this way.

Ford was among the first to realize that mass production requires mass consumption in mass markets. He reasoned that, if standardized commodities – such as cars – were to be produced on a large scale, there had to be enough consumers able to buy them. In 1914, Ford took the unprecedented step of raising wages to US$5 for an eight-hour day – a very generous amount at the time. It was aimed at ensuring that a working-class lifestyle could include owning a Ford car. As Harvey (1989: 126) remarks: 'The purpose of the five-dollar, eight-hour day was only in part to secure worker compliance with the discipline required to work the highly productive assembly-line system. It was coincidentally meant to provide workers with sufficient income to consume the mass-produced products the corporations were about to turn out in ever vaster quantities.' At this time, Fordism was characterized by mutual reliance: of workers on the employer for wages and employers on the supply of local workers for their profit-making activities. Unlike transnational corporations today, it was not possible for a company such as Ford to move its factories and headquarters around the globe to find the cheapest labour and lightest regulation. Ford also enlisted the services of a small army of social

workers, who were sent into the homes of employees to educate them in the habits of consumption.

Fordism brought huge numbers of workers together, facilitating the growth of strong trade unionism. What happens when robots replace the workers?

In economic sociology, Fordism refers to the historical period from the early twentieth century to the early 1970s, which was characterized by mass production, relative stability in labour relations and a high degree of unionization. Under Fordism, firms made long-term commitments to workers and wages were linked to productivity. Collective bargaining agreements – formal agreements between firms and unions on working conditions and wages – ensured both that workers accepted automated regimes and that there was sufficient demand for mass-produced commodities.

By the 1970s the Fordist system was breaking down. The reasons for this are complex. Fordism was based on supplying goods to domestic markets but, as transnational corporations spread and international markets became more important, the domestic-oriented Fordist system was effectively outgrown. Multinationals also brought new competition. Japan and what was then West Germany (and, later, the NICs of South-

East Asia) broke the intimate link between domestic production and consumption. Imported goods became more popular to domestic consumers and the apparently 'cosy' Fordist arrangements were breached (Tonkiss 2006: 93–4).

It had looked as though Fordism was the likely future of industrial production everywhere, but this proved not to be the case. Fordist principles can be applied most successfully only in those industries that produce standardized products for large, uniform markets. To set up mechanized production lines is enormously expensive and, once the system is established, is quite rigid. To alter a product, substantial reinvestment is needed. Firms in countries where labour is expensive find it difficult to compete with those where wages are cheaper. This was one factor which led to the rise of the Japanese car industry (though Japanese wage levels today are no longer low) and, subsequently, that of South Korea.

Fordism and Taylorism are also low-trust systems in which tasks are set by management and geared to machines. Those who carry out work tasks are closely supervised and have very little autonomy, as employees are continuously monitored through surveillance systems and scientific management (Misztal 2013: 21–3). In workplaces with many low-trust positions, the level of employee dissatisfaction and absenteeism is high and industrial conflict is common. A high-trust system, by contrast, is one in which workers are permitted, within overall guidelines, to control the pace and even the content of their work. Such systems have become more common today, transforming the way we think about workplace organization and the execution of work tasks.

Post-Fordist change

Since the mid-1970s, flexible practices have been widely adopted in product development, production techniques, management style, the working environment, employee involvement and marketing. Group production, problem-solving teams, multi-tasking and niche marketing are just some of the strategies that companies have adopted to take advantage of an increasingly global economy. The concept of post-

[Fordism](#) was devised to capture this overall radical departure from Fordist principles (Amin 1994; Beynon and Nichols 2006). The concept was popularized by Michael Piore and Charles Sabel (1984) to describe the era after Fordism in which flexibility and innovation are maximized to meet new demands for diverse, customized products.

Post-Fordism includes the set of overlapping changes occurring in design, manufacturing and distribution, though some argue that these have to be related to changes in the wider society, too. Flexibility and opposition to uniformity can also be seen in areas as diverse as party politics, welfare programmes, consumer demand and lifestyle choices. Hence, post-Fordism has been used to discuss a narrow set of changes in production processes but also the much broader shift to a more diverse, highly individualized social order. We shall consider these trends before looking at some criticisms of the general post-Fordist thesis. Connecting the world of economic production to politics, policy and changing lifestyles in this way is fundamental to [economic sociology](#).

Group production, flexibility and global production

One significant change is the spread of flexible production and computer-aided design (CAD) and manufacture (CAM). The Fordist system was unable to produce small orders, let alone goods tailored to an individual customer, symbolized in Henry Ford's famous quip about the first mass-produced car: 'People can have the Model T in any colour – so long as it's black.' Computer-aided design coupled with computer-based technology altered this situation in a radical way, enabling 'mass customization' of products (Davis 1988). For example, 5,000 shirts might be produced each day using an assembly line, but it is now possible to customize every one of those shirts just as quickly and at no greater expense.

Internet data are used to gain information about individual consumer demand, which is then turned into products made to their precise specifications. Some proponents argue that [mass customization](#) is a new Industrial Revolution, as momentous as the introduction of mass production at the start of the twentieth century. Sceptics are less convinced, pointing out that mass customization creates the illusion of

choice, but, in reality, options available to internet customers are no greater than those offered by a typical mail-order catalogue (J. Collins 2000).

Frankfurt School critiques of art in the age of mass production and consumption are covered in [chapter 19](#), 'The Media'.

Dell Computers has taken mass customization a long way. Its customers must go online, as Dell does not have retail outlets. From there, people can select the precise mix of features they desire. On receipt of an order, the computer is custom built and then shipped. In effect, Dell has turned traditional ways of doing business upside down: firms used to build a product first, then worry about how to sell it. Today, mass customizers like Dell sell first and build second. This shift has had important consequences. The need to hold large stocks of parts – a major cost for manufacturers – has been dramatically reduced as 'just-in-time' methods, where components are delivered only as required (just in time), have been introduced. In addition, an increasing share of production is outsourced, and the rapid transfer of information between manufacturer and supplier made possible by the internet is now vital. The scale of outsourcing has increased dramatically, threatening the relatively well-paid jobs of workers in the industrialized, high-income economies.

Changes in manufacturing include not just *how* products are made but also *where*. For most of the twentieth century, giant companies such as Ford and General Motors employed tens of thousands of factory workers, making everything from individual components to the final cars, which were then sold in the manufacturers' own showrooms. The post-Fordist turn has seen another type of production in which giant retailers such as Amazon, not manufacturers, are in control. In the early twenty-first century, Amazon began setting up its own spaces *inside* the warehouses of suppliers – a strategy termed 'under-their-tents' (IMS

2013). Essentially an extension of the just-in-time principle, this move allows Amazon to reduce its own stock and warehouse building costs and to take, process and deliver orders from the 'host' company's product range much faster than the competition. Instead of moving consumer packaged goods (CPGs) all around the country, they can now simply be moved across the floor of the same warehouse.

Bonacich and Appelbaum (2000) found that, in clothing manufacture, most 'manufacturers' actually employed no garment workers at all. Instead, they used thousands of factories around the world to make the clothing, which they then sold in department stores and retail outlets. Manufacturers do not own factories and are not responsible for working conditions. Around two-thirds of all clothing sold in America is made in factories outside the USA, including in China, Taiwan and the Philippines, where workers are paid a fraction of the American average wage. Retailers and manufacturers scour the globe for the lowest wage costs, and much of the clothing bought by people in the Global North today is likely to have been manufactured in sweatshops by young workers who are paid very little for making clothing or sportswear that sells for tens or hundreds of pounds per item.

See chapter 6, 'Global Inequality' for a discussion of sweatshop labour and child labour.

Even when production has become customized, such as in the electronics industry, elements of the Fordist production line still exist.

Group production – production undertaken by collaborative groups of workers – has been used in conjunction with automation as a way of reorganizing work. The central idea is to increase employees' motivation by letting groups collaborate rather than requiring individuals to perform a single repetitive task. However, several studies have identified a number of negative consequences. Although direct managerial authority is less apparent, constant supervision by other team workers represents a new form of mutual surveillance. The result can be 'a shop-floor reality that stands in stark contrast to the training ideals' (Raz 2002: 131–2).

Laurie Graham (1995) worked for six months on the production line at the Japanese-owned Subaru-Isuzu car plant in Indiana. She found that peer pressure from other workers to achieve higher productivity was relentless. One co-worker told her that, after initially being enthusiastic about group production, peer supervision was just a new means of management trying to 'work people to death'. Graham also found that Subaru-Isuzu used the group-production concept to resist trade unions.

If management and workers were perceived as being on the same team, there should be no conflict: a good 'team player' does not complain. Demands for higher pay or a lessening of responsibility were seen as a lack of cooperativeness and commitment. So, while group production can provide workers with opportunities for less monotonous work, there is also evidence that 'management maintains control of employees in a workplace despite employee participation and team-based production' (Fairhurst and Zoller 2008: 135).

Criticisms of post-Fordism

While acknowledging that the world of work and economic life has undergone significant changes, the label 'post-Fordist' as an overall characterization of these is rejected by some scholars. One recurring criticism is that Fordist practices have not been abandoned wholesale. What we have seen, say critics, is the integration of some new approaches into existing Fordist techniques – a new or 'neo-Fordism' rather than post-Fordism (Wood 1989). Others see both Fordism and post-Fordism as overgeneralizations which mask the fact that economic production has always been characterized by a diversity of techniques across different industries (Pollert 1988).

Nonetheless, there is little doubt that, whatever name we give them, the shifting methods of production outlined above are part and parcel of the increasing globalization of economic life. Post-Fordist trends have reshaped the experience of work as the previously predictable, stable world has given way to a more flexible, less secure working environment, which, as we will see later in the chapter, has had consequences right across society.

The feminization of work

Until the latter part of the twentieth century, paid work in the developed countries was predominantly the sphere of men, who needed a 'breadwinner's wage' to support the whole family. This situation has changed radically, as more and more women have moved into the labour force in what has been described as the gradual 'feminization' of work (Caraway 2007). This multifaceted process is a

major historical shift that transformed the experience of paid work and is transforming gender relations in every area of society.

For the vast majority of the population in pre-industrial societies, productive activity and the activities of the household were not separate. Production was carried on either in the home or nearby, and all members of the family participated in work on the land or in handicrafts. Women often had considerable influence within the household as a result of their importance in economic processes, even if they were excluded from the male-dominated realms of politics and warfare. Much of this changed with the separation of the workplace from the home brought about by the development of industrial workplaces.

An increasing division was established between home and workplace, and the idea of separate spheres – public and private – became entrenched. Men, by merit of their employment outside the home, spent more time in the public realm and became involved in local affairs, politics and the market. Women came to be associated with 'domestic' values and were responsible for childcare, maintaining the home and preparing food for the family. The idea that 'a woman's place is in the home' had different implications. Affluent women enjoyed the services of maids, nurses and domestic servants, but the burdens were harsh for poorer women, who had to cope with household chores as well as engaging in paid work.

Women's participation in the paid labour force rose more or less continuously over the twentieth century. One major influence was the labour shortage during the First World War, when women carried out many jobs previously regarded as exclusively for men. On returning from the war, men again took over most of those jobs, but the myth of the supposedly 'natural', pre-established pattern had been broken. In the years since 1945, the gendered division of labour has changed dramatically. For example, the UK employment rate for women – the proportion of those of working age in employment – rose between 1971 and 2019 from 53 per cent to 72.4 per cent. By contrast, the employment rate for men fell from 92 per cent to 80 per cent, thus narrowing the gender gap in employment rates (see figure 17.1). Much

of the increase in women's economic activity has been the result of a growth in relatively lower-paid, part-time work.

There are several reasons why the gender gap has been narrowing. As the average age of mothers at first childbirth has increased, many women take on paid work before having children and return to work afterwards. Smaller families means the length of time women spend at home caring for young children has been reduced. Financial reasons are crucial in explaining why more women have entered the labour market. Economic pressures on the household, including higher male unemployment, have led more women to seek paid work. Many households find that two incomes are required to sustain their desired lifestyle, and the dual-income family has become commonplace. Finally, it is important to note that many women have chosen to enter the labour market (and higher education) out of a desire for personal fulfilment and in response to the drive for gender equality. Having gained legal equality with men, many women have seized on new opportunities to realize these rights in their own lives.
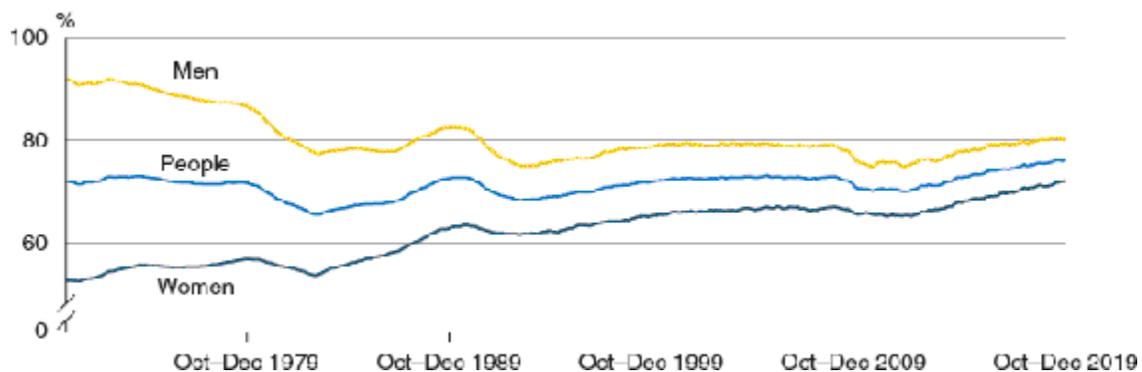
Figure 17.1 UK employment rates by gender (16–64 years), 1971–2019

Source: ONS (2020c: 3).

Most new jobs today are created in services such as office work, retail and service centres, call centres, airports and financial services, and many of these vacancies have been filled by women. Globally, the overwhelming majority of workers are now employed in services (in the Global North) or agriculture (in the Global South), with less than one-quarter in traditionally male-dominated manufacturing. In 2002, for the first time, a higher percentage of the global workforce was

employed in services compared with either agriculture or industry, and it seems likely that the trend will continue ([figure 17.2](#)).

Globally, women make up around 40 per cent of the workforce, though there are significant national differences. Women make up the largest part of the workforce in sub-Saharan Africa, with over 50 per cent in Liberia, Gambia, Tanzania and Zimbabwe. In the countries of the European Union, women make up at least 45 per cent of the workforce, while the female share in the Middle East and North Africa is generally much lower. Women make up less than one-fifth of the workforce in Syria, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Qatar (Fetterolf 2017; [figure 17.3](#)). In the European Union, Central and Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States and Latin America, as well as in the Middle East and North Africa, women are employed predominantly in the service sector. In sub-Saharan Africa women work largely in agriculture (ILO 2007a).

The *nature* of women's employment in many countries is also different from that of men. Reports from the UK suggest that three-quarters of the working female population are engaged in part-time, low-paid work – such as clerical, cleaning, cashiering and catering – and this pattern is repeated across the developed economies (Women and Equality Unit 2004). In the following sections, we look at the origins and implications of the feminization of work.
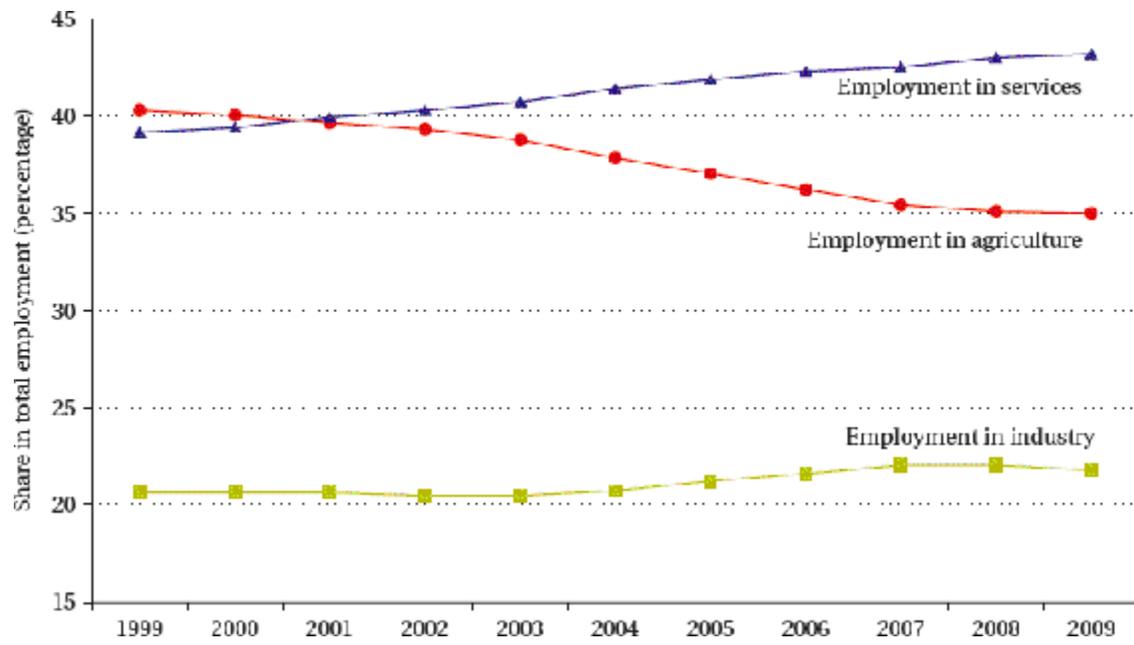
Figure 17.2 Global employment by sector (share of total), 1999–2009

Source: ILO (2011a: 20).

Female share of the labor force (%)

Country	Percentage
Zimbabwe	52.8%
Malawi	52.2%
The Gambia	50.8%
Liberia	50.6%
Tanzania	50.5%
Lithuania	50.4%
Latvia	49.8%
Barbados	49.7%
Moldova	49.5%
The Bahamas	49.5%
U.S.	46.8%
EU*	46.5%
India	25.9%
Kosovo	23.8%
Egypt	23.6%
Pakistan	22.9%
Palestinian territories	20.6%
Algeria	18.1%
Iran	17.4%
Saudi Arabia	16.6%
Syria	15.1%
Qatar	13.4%
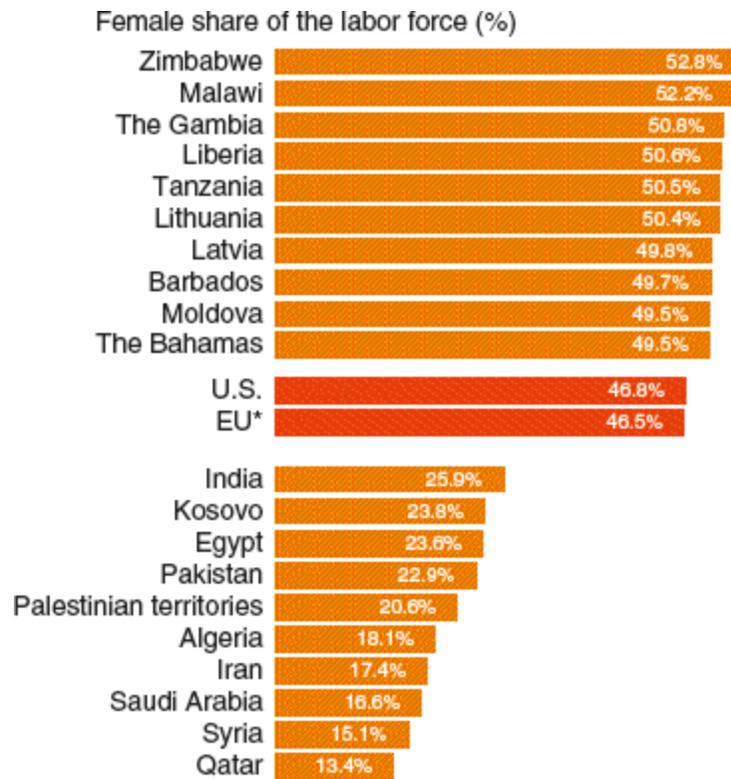
*European Union median based on 28 member countries.

Figure 17.3 Female share of the workforce, selected countries, 2010–16

Source: Fetterolf (2017).

Gender inequality at work

The rise of feminist scholarship in the 1970s led to the analysis of gender relations in all the main institutions of society, and feminist sociologists explored the ways in which modern organizations developed in specifically gendered ways. Organizations were characterized by occupational gender segregation, and, as they began to enter the labour market in larger numbers, women tended to be segregated into *categories of occupations* that were low paying, involved routine work and did not provide opportunities for promotion. Second, in many workplaces, women performed routine tasks – as clerks, typists, secretaries and office managers – as men expected well-paid careers.

Gendered occupational segregation refers to the fact that men and women are concentrated in *different types* of jobs, based on prevailing

norms of what is appropriate 'male' and 'female' work. Haas (2020: 15) argues that this segregation is not a purely economic matter but also involves historically transmitted cultural meanings. For example, gender difference was historically constructed as hierarchical, with 'men as leaders, women as being led', which 'legitimated and reproduced patriarchy in the home and workplace that survives as wage inequality.' Modern corporations developed this way, as male-dominated environments in which women were excluded from power, denied opportunities and victimized on the basis of gender through sexual harassment and workplace discrimination.

Occupations dominated by women tend to be among the lowest paid.

Hence, women became concentrated in poorly paid, routine occupations. Secretarial and caring jobs, such as nursing, social work and childcare, were overwhelmingly held by women and characterized as typically 'female' occupations as they were linked to what was presented as women's 'primary' role in the domestic sphere.

Occupational segregation has both vertical and horizontal components. Vertical segregation refers to the tendency for women to be

concentrated in jobs with little authority and room for advancement (at the bottom), while men occupy more powerful and influential positions (at the top). For example, in 2017, 15.4 per cent of all male staff in England's NHS were senior doctors or senior managers (the best-paid roles) compared to just 3.2 per cent of female staff (Appleby and Schlepper 2019: 16).

Horizontal segregation refers to the tendency for men and women to occupy different categories of job. Women dominate in domestic and routine clerical positions, while men are clustered in semi-skilled and skilled manual positions. In Britain, the Equality and Human Rights Commission's *Triennial Review* (EHRC 2010) found that women made up 83 per cent of all those working in personal services, 77 per cent of those in administrative and secretarial posts, and 65 per cent of sales positions. Conversely, they took just 6 per cent of engineering posts, 13 per cent of ICT jobs, and 14 per cent of positions as architects, planners and surveyors (also see ['Using your sociological imagination' 17.2](#)).

Women are also found disproportionately in the public rather than the private sector, making them more vulnerable to the cuts in public-sector employment that followed the 2008–9 recession. The *Triennial Review* concluded that, overall, gender was more significant than social class in accounting for young people's career expectations and aspirations. Boys expected to work in engineering, computing, construction, architecture and skilled trades such as mechanics, while girls' expectations were for jobs in teaching, hairdressing, beauty therapy, childcare, nursing and midwifery.

A broader discussion of gender inequalities can be found in [chapter 7](#), 'Gender and Sexuality'.

The average pay of employed women in Britain, as elsewhere, is below that of men, although the difference has narrowed somewhat over the last forty-five years or so. This general tendency towards closing the

'gender wage gap' is a significant step in the move towards equality. In 2014 the gender pay gap – the difference between men's and women's median earnings as a percentage of men's median earnings – was still 19 per cent for all employees (full- and part-time), 11 per cent for full-time employees in the public sector and 17.5 per cent in the private sector (ONS 2014b: 10–16). Much of this gap can be accounted for by interruptions to employment as women perform various caring roles.

Occupational segregation by gender is one of the main factors in the persistence of a wage gap between men and women, as women are over-represented in the more poorly paid job sectors. However, we should remember that the gender pay gap also exists in occupational roles that are broadly similar but where women are, on average, paid less than men. This has been found in the pay rates across the entertainment industry, including films, TV drama and broadcast news. For example, in January 2020, the BBC broadcaster Samira Ahmed won an equal pay case at a UK employment tribunal which found that a male presenter, Jeremy Vine, had been systematically paid around six times more 'for doing the same work' (BBC News 2020e).

Several related processes have influenced the narrowing gender pay gap. One is that more women are moving into higher-paid professional positions. Young women with good qualifications are now just as likely as their male counterparts to get well-paid work. Girls regularly outperform boys at school, and in many university subjects women outnumber men. Their improved educational qualifications seem to lead inexorably towards more women finding their way into the professions, looking for a long career and promotion to the higher levels. Yet this progress at the top of the occupational structure is offset by the enormous increase in the number of women in low-paid, part-time jobs within the rapidly expanding service sector. Taken over a lifetime, the gendered wage gap produces striking differences in overall earnings, and being on the wrong side of the gender pay gap has serious consequences for people's long-term quality of life (Rake 2000).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

17.2 The five Cs of women's work

Jobs traditionally done by women are relatively poorly paid and socially undervalued. Low-paid jobs dominated by women are found in each of the five 'Cs' – cleaning, catering, caring, cashiering and clerical work – and a majority of working women still work in these five sectors, plus the better-paid sector of teaching (Dunford and Perrons 2013: 471). Zelizer (2017 [1997]: 65–6) argues that, historically, married women's earnings were characterized as 'pin money', considered to be a 'less fundamental kind of money than her husband's wages', despite the fact that this money was crucial for families who otherwise struggled to make ends meet.

The concentration of women in the 'five C' roles contributes to their relatively poor rewards. These sectors are also presented as 'naturally' associated with women because of what are regarded as women's 'innate' attributes, even though these are complex forms of work that require a range of skills. The cultural 'naturalization' of gendered forms of work has meant that the association of 'women's work' with low value and low pay becomes solidified and hard to change. Dunford and Perrons (2013: 474) argue that these are 'deeply embedded cultural practices and gendered social norms; norms which uphold and reinforce existing enactments and understandings of appropriate roles for women and men and the value of different activities.' As a result, the undervaluation of women's work is often not taken seriously, and women in these roles have been largely overlooked by policy-makers.

For more on women in poverty in the UK, see , 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

Changes in the domestic division of labour

A consequence of more women entering paid work is that traditional family patterns are being renegotiated. The 'male breadwinner' model has become the exception rather than the rule, and, in terms of both housework and financial decision-making, women's traditional domestic roles are undergoing significant change as the number of dual-earner households grows. In some households there has been a move towards more egalitarian relationships, though women continue to shoulder the main responsibility for housework.

A UK survey at the start of the twenty-first century found that women still spent nearly three hours a day on average on housework (excluding shopping and childcare), compared with the 1 hour 40 minutes spent by men (ONS 2003). Once shopping and childcare are included, the difference becomes even wider. Men are contributing more to domestic tasks than in the past, although some have suggested that the process is one of 'lagged adaptation' (Gershuny 1994). More recent studies suggest that women still have less leisure time than men,

despite the fact that increasing numbers of women are in paid employment (Kan et al. 2011).

We can conclude that the renegotiation of domestic tasks has clearly not changed as quickly as the entry of women into the labour market, prompting some to argue that the process of equalization in sharing household tasks has now stalled (Crompton et al. 2005). Even in dual-earner, mixed-sex couples that actively aim for a more equitable arrangement, men take on only those tasks that can be performed quickly, leaving the more time-consuming domestic labour to their partner or outsourcing it to the service sector to be performed by working-class women (Windebank and Martinez-Perez 2018).

This process of the commoditization of some aspects of the domestic division of labour demonstrates the intransigence of heterosexual men as gender norms and practices and employment patterns change. Yet, as outsourcing can occur only in households with sufficient wealth to consider it as a realistic option, this recent shift in the gendered division of labour remains the privilege of the middle classes (Esping-Andersen 2009; Kilkey et al. 2013).

The issue of domestic work is examined in more detail in [chapter 15](), 'Families and Intimate Relationships'.

Automation and skills

The relationship between technology and work has long been of interest to sociologists. How is our experience of work affected by the type of technology that is involved? The digital revolution has attracted renewed interest in this question in relation to integration of the internet, computerization, robotics and the emerging applications of artificial intelligence.

The majority of automated robots used in industry today are found in vehicle manufacture and electronics industries, producing televisions, computers, tablets, smartphones and lots more. A robot is an automatic device that can perform functions ordinarily done by human workers. The usefulness of robots has been relatively limited so far, but, as the technology rapidly develops, costs fall and we approach a 'tipping point', it is clear that robotics, automated production and computerization will spread further.

The media regularly tell us that the continuing development of artificial intelligence (AI) and robotics will transform the world of work, as robots will take over not just relatively simple, factory-based tasks but also many middle- and higher-income service jobs. The widespread adoption of AI in data analytics will affect not just automated trucks and drilling machines in the mining industry, robotic welding and spraying in car manufacture or automated storage and distribution systems in Amazon's warehouses, but also workers in financial services – such as mortgage and insurance broking – retail and clerical work and healthcare systems. Is this really the beginning of the end of 'work' as we have known it, or are these reports exaggerated accounts of a more prosaic and less revolutionary change?

AI today typically has the most impact in work tasks that are routine and take place in predictable environments. For instance, a team of researchers in Illinois, USA, report that they used AI to analyse over 42,000 lung scans from 15,000 patients, aiming to improve the accuracy of diagnoses of lung cancer. Using AI led to 11 per cent fewer 'false positives' (wrongly diagnosed as cancer) and 5 per cent more correct cancer diagnoses when tested against a team of six radiologists (Gallagher 2019). Early diagnosis leads to earlier treatment, so, if clinical trials prove effective, this technology could have major health benefits. In cases such as this, AI may enable partial automation but will not eliminate the role of radiologists altogether.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

17.3 The end of (human) work?

- Software 'bots' use an algorithm which automatically creates an article when an earthquake is detected, removing the need for journalists.

- • BBC news adopted robotic cameras in its studio eliminating the need for human camera operators.

- Online retailer Amazon announced that it is experimenting with a new delivery system –Amazon Prime Air – which would deliver products to customers using unmanned drones.

- Google has developed autonomous, 'self-driving' (mainly electric) cars which are able to negotiate their way through traffic, and several states in the USA have legislated to allow self-driving vehicles to operate on their roads.

- The boss of the taxi firm Uber Technologies, Travis Kalanick, says that it is his ultimate aim to replace human drivers with driverless vehicles in the not too distant future.

- 'Bob', an 'autonomous android' or robot security guard, moves around the offices of G4S Technologies in Gloucestershire, UK, scanning for unusual events and reporting directly to the authorities.

- Armed forces routinely use drones, mine sweepers, bomb disposal droids and remotecontrolled machines to reduce troop numbers and protect their soldiers. (Crossley 2014; Zolfagharifard 2014)

Autonomous, self-driving cars are moving very quickly from sci-fi movies into reality.

THINKING CRITICALLY

AI and robotics has great potential to take over many routine tasks, but what does it offer higher education? Which aspects of teaching and lecturing could be performed by these new technologies? Why might any reduction of face-to-face contact be resisted by students?
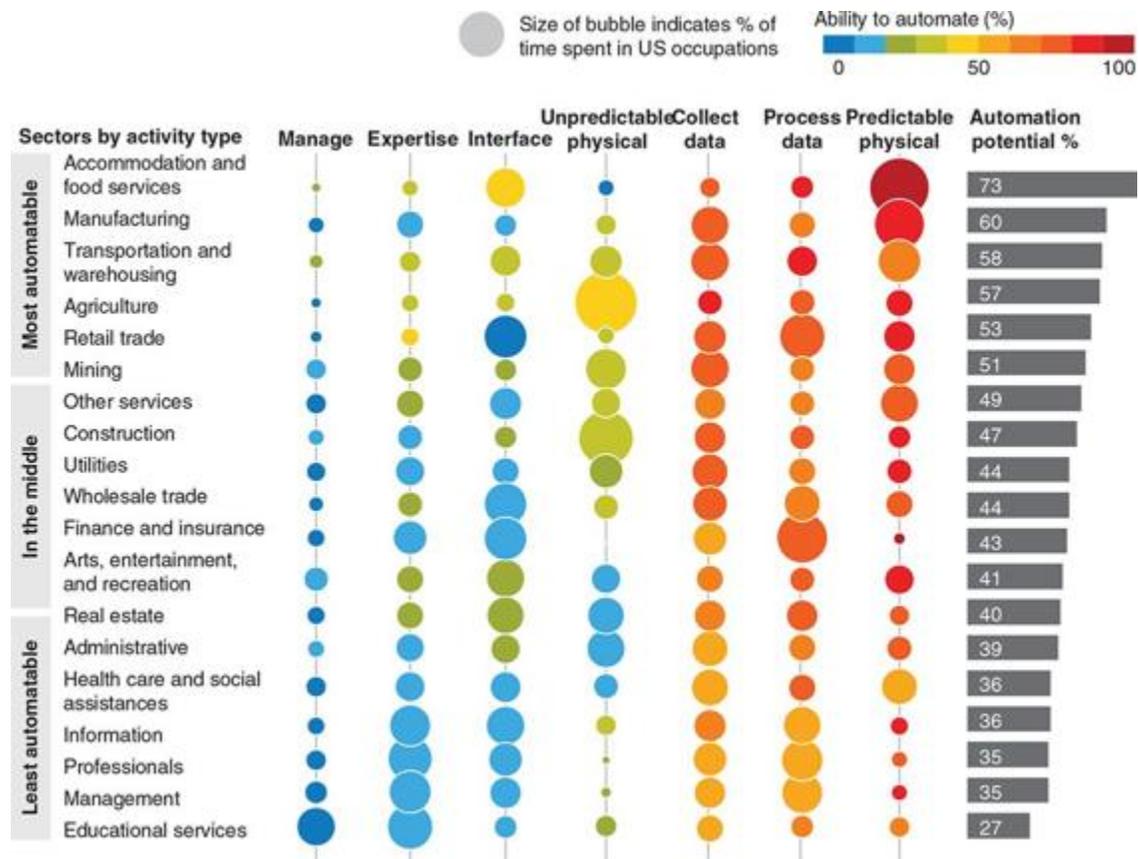
Figure 17.4 Automatable activities by economic sector, USA

Source: McKinsey Global Institute (2017: 7).

Indeed, rather than eliminating entire occupational roles, the impact of new technology so far has been to take over some of the varied tasks that make up specific jobs and work roles. It has been estimated that only around 5 per cent of occupations in the USA are *completely* 'automatable', while 62 per cent are at least 30 per cent automatable (McKinsey Global Institute 2017: 9–10; figure 17.4). Frey and Osborne (2013) suggest that up to 47 per cent of jobs in the USA might be at risk from increasing AI, automation and robotics by 2025. In particular they argue that 'most workers in transportation and logistics occupations, together with the bulk of office and administrative support workers, and labour in production occupations, are at risk' (ibid.: 44). They also find that many service jobs are susceptible to computerization. On the other hand, highly skilled and relatively highwage jobs are the least susceptible. For instance, legal assistants and 'paralegals' may well find their work being taken over by computers, but lawyers are in relatively

low-risk positions on account of the unpredictable interactive nature of their role. Some see such forecasts as too negative given that the social impact of automation has been the subject of heated debate since at least the 1960s.

If the costs associated with bringing more automation and AI implementation for business do not prove insurmountable, then some groups of workers may find their roles no longer exist, while many others may become effectively deskilled operatives with the consequent loss of status and income. We should remember that predictions such as these are based on extrapolating into the future based on the existing rate of technological development, but it may be that a tipping point will be reached which will radically and rapidly increase the impact of new technologies on the world of work.

The introduction of new technologies also generates new roles, jobs and occupations that did not previously exist. Many of these jobs lend themselves to independent or self-employment in IT hardware manufacture, as app and game developers, database administrators, IT security experts, web developers and computer systems analysts. The digital sector of the economy will also need more statisticians, data analysts and market research analysts. Although it is hard to evaluate the overall balance of job creation versus job destruction, it seems clear that there is a need continually to upskill the workforce for the digital age.

In an influential book, *Alienation and Freedom* (1964), Robert Blauner examined the experience of workers in four different industries with varying levels of technology. Using the ideas of Durkheim and Marx, Blauner operationalized the concept of alienation, measuring the extent to which workers in each industry experienced powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self-estrangement. He concluded that workers on assembly lines were the most disaffected, with levels of alienation somewhat lower in workplaces using automation. In other words, Blauner argued that the introduction of automation was responsible for reversing the otherwise steady trend towards increasing worker alienation. Automation helped to integrate the workforce and gave employees a sense of control over their work that

had been lacking previously. However, as shown by ['Classic studies'](#) [17.2](#), by no means all sociologists agreed with Blauner's assessment.

"We're looking for someone with your exact qualifications, but a mechanical version."

One early account of the introduction of computerization into a traditional workplace is Sennett's (1998) study of a bakery that had been bought by a large food conglomerate and automated with the introduction of high-tech machinery. Computerized baking radically altered the way that bread was made. Instead of using their hands to mix the ingredients and knead the dough and their noses and eyes to judge when the bread was baked, the workers now had no physical contact with the materials or finished loaves. In fact, the entire process

was controlled and monitored by computer. Computers decided the temperature and the baking time of the ovens.

Bakery workers were then hired because they were skilled with computers, not because they knew how to bake bread. Ironically, they used very few of their computer skills either. The production process involved little more than pushing buttons. In fact, when at one point the computerized machinery broke down, the entire production process was halted because none of the bakery's 'skilled' workers were trained or empowered to repair the fault. Automation had diminished their autonomy. The introduction of computerized technology has led to a general increase in all workers' skills but also to a bifurcated workforce, composed of a small group of highly skilled professionals with a great degree of autonomy and a larger group of clerical, service and production workers with little or no control or freedom.

[Classic studies 17.2](#) Harry Braverman on the degradation of work in capitalist economies

The research problem

Can technological innovations positively influence workers' experience of the labour process? Why are some technologies more widely adopted than others in the production process? Blauner's optimistic conclusions about the impact of automation were rejected by the American Marxist writer Harry Braverman in his famous book *Labor and Monopoly Capital* (1974). In this he set out a very different evaluation of automation and Fordist methods of production and management, which he saw as part of a general deskilling of the workforce.

Braverman's explanation

Braverman did not come to the study of capitalist production as a sociologist. He had been (among other things) an apprentice coppersmith, a pipefitter, a sheet-metal worker and an office worker, and in his teenage years he became a socialist. Hence, he approached the problem of technology, automation and human skills having experienced at first-hand some of the effects of technological change. This highly involved and committed perspective comes through clearly in his account.

Braverman argued that, far from improving their lot, automation, combined with Taylorist management methods, actually intensified workers' estrangement from the production process and 'deskilled' the labour force. By imposing Taylorist organizational techniques and breaking up the labour process into specialized tasks, managers were able to exert more control over the workforce. In both industrial settings and modern offices, the introduction of new technology contributed to the overall degradation of work by limiting the need for creative human input. Instead, all that was

required was an unthinking, unreflective body capable of endlessly carrying out the same unskilled task.

Braverman rejected the idea that technologies were somehow 'neutral' or inevitable. Instead, he argued, they are developed and introduced to serve the needs of capitalists. Similarly, he did not see any point in blaming machines or technologies themselves for worker alienation. The problem lay in social class divisions which determined how such machinery was used. In particular, Braverman argued that, since the late nineteenth century, an era of '[monopoly](#) capitalism' had developed. As smaller firms were swallowed up or put out of business by larger corporations, the new monopolistic businesses were able to afford a whole tier of technicians, scientists and managers whose task was to find better, more effective ways of controlling workers – scientific management or Taylorism is one example.

Some industrial sociologists had seen technological development and automated processes leading to the need for a better educated, better trained and more involved workforce. Yet Braverman disagreed. In fact, he argued that exactly the reverse was true. While 'average skill levels' may well be higher than in previous times, as with all averages, this conceals the fact that most workers have actually been deskilled. As he caustically put it, 'to then say that the "average" skill has been raised is to adopt the logic of the statistician who, with one foot in the fire and the other in ice water, will tell you that, "on the average", he is perfectly comfortable' (1974: 424).

Paradoxically, the more that scientific knowledge becomes embedded in the labour process, the less the workers need to know and the less they understand about the machinery and the process itself. Instead, an increasing divide emerges as the control by managers of workers intensifies. Braverman saw monopoly capitalism as a stronger form of capitalism that would be much more difficult to overthrow.

Critical points

Several objections have been raised to Braverman's thesis. First, he overstates the spread of Taylorism, assuming that it will become the

dominant form of management, but it never did become widely implemented, which leaves Braverman arguing against a 'straw man'. Second, some feminists have contended that the thesis is really focused on male workers and fails to explain the particular nature of women's oppression. Others suggest that he does not provide an adequate account of changing family structures and their impact on working life. Finally, it may be argued that Braverman's thesis of deskilling tends to romanticize earlier, especially craft-based, forms of production, which are then contrasted with modern mass manufacture. Such a view could be said to be ahistorical – not properly taking into account historical development.

Contemporary significance

Braverman's thesis had a major impact. It challenged the dominant functionalist perspectives within industrial sociology and influenced many later sociologists working in this field. The book was also a popular success, having sold some 125,000 copies by the year 2000. However, Braverman's main aim was arguably to contribute to the renewal of Marxist theory itself, which he thought had failed to adapt to the radically different form of capitalism of the twentieth century. And though some Marxists have criticized his thesis as too pessimistic, failing to leave enough room for workers to resist, the decline in trade union membership, along with the widespread introduction of information technology, shows that his central argument retains much of its force.

The skills debate is a complex one, because what constitutes a 'skill' is socially constructed and subject to change (Steinberg 1990). As such, conventional understandings of 'skilled' work tend to reflect the status of the typical incumbent of the job rather than the objective difficulty of the task. The history of occupations is littered with examples of jobs in which the same task was assigned a different skill level (and even renamed) once women entered the field. For example, in the twentieth-century clothing industry in Britain, both men and women worked as machinists, but male machinists were classed as 'skilled' workers and women as 'semi-skilled' workers. These classifications were based not

on levels of objective skill or types of training but on the gender of the person performing the task (Reskin and Roos 1990).

Studies that have examined skill in terms of the substantive complexity of tasks tend to support the 'upskilling' position, whereas those that examine skill in terms of autonomy and/or control exercised by workers argue that automation leads to deskilling (Zuboff 1988; Vallas and Beck 1996). Skill levels are also related to geographical location and local employment conditions. For instance, in the Global North, contact-centre work is generally seen as a relatively low-skill, mundane form of employment, and many sociologists criticize the pay levels, tight surveillance and conditions of work, seeing call centres as the office equivalent of assembly-line production (Moran 2005). However, in several cities in India, where contact centres have grown rapidly, the work is viewed as relatively highly skilled, well paid and an attractive option for graduates. Recent research finds that many Indian call-centre workers share similar values and lifestyles with the Western middle classes, representing part of the vanguard of an emerging global middle class (Murphy 2011).

Economic growth and development are discussed in chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

The knowledge economy

As we saw earlier, post-Fordist theories focus on some significant shifts in production and consumption processes, but some observers have suggested that what is occurring today is actually a phase of development beyond the industrial era altogether. A variety of terms have been coined to describe this new social order, such as the post-industrial society (Bell 1974), the information age (Castells 1996a) and postmodernization (Crook et al. 1992). The term that has come into most common usage, however, is the knowledge economy (Unger

2019). A precise definition of the knowledge economy is difficult to formulate, but in general terms it refers to an economy in which much of the workforce is involved not in the physical production or distribution of material goods but in their design, development, technology, marketing, sale and servicing. As Leadbeater (1999: vii) observed:

> Most of us [knowledge workers] make our money from thin air: we produce nothing that can be weighed, touched or easily measured. Our output is not stockpiled at harbours, stored in warehouses or shipped in railway cars. Most of us earn our livings providing service, judgement, information and analysis, whether in a telephone call centre, a lawyer's office, a government department or a scientific laboratory. We are all in the thin-air business.

Knowledge-based industries include high technology, education and training, research and development, and the financial and investment sectors. The Work Foundation (Brinkley and Lee 2006) produced a report for the EU which found that over 40 per cent of European Union workers were employed in the knowledge-based industries, with Sweden, Denmark, the UK and Finland leading the way. Education and health services constituted the largest group, with recreational and cultural services next; together these sectors employed almost 20 per cent of European Union workers. Market-based sectors, including financial services, business and communication services, accounted for a further 15 per cent.

Investment in the knowledge economy – in the form of public education, spending on software development, and research and development – comprises a significant part of many countries' budgets. Admittedly, the knowledge economy remains a difficult phenomenon to investigate. It is easier to measure the value of physical things than 'weightless' ideas, research and knowledge. Yet it is undeniable that the generation and application of knowledge has become increasingly central to the contemporary global economy.

Portfolio workers and homeworking

One of the arguments of post-Fordist theorists is that new forms of work allow employees to increase the breadth of their skills by engaging in a variety of tasks rather than performing just one. The move towards 'multi-skilling' means that employment decisions are increasingly made on the basis of adaptability and the ability to learn new skills quickly, rather than simply on qualifications. Thus, expert knowledge of a particular software application might not be as valuable as the ability to pick up new ideas easily.

In light of the impact of the global economy and the demand for a more flexible labour force, some sociologists argue that more people will become portfolio workers. They will have a 'skills portfolio' – a number of different job skills and credentials – which allows them to move between different kinds of occupation during the course of their working lives. Only a relatively small proportion will have continuous careers with the same business or economic sector. On this view, the idea of a 'job for life' is largely gone. Yet people still garner 'career capital' and social networks as they move around and experiment with skills, developing a greater sense of self-confidence, effectively making sense of their working life just as they enact it (Watson 2008: 256–7).

On some estimates, young graduates can expect to work in eleven different jobs using three different skill bases over the course of their working lives. Yet this remains the exception rather than the rule, as managers recognize a high staff turnover can be costly and bad for morale. King et al. (2005) found that employment agencies looking for IT workers generally prefer 'known' candidates for permanent jobs, viewing those with 'portfolio' career profiles with some suspicion. Nonetheless, many thousands of workers may be forced to develop and diversify their skills in order to sustain employment, while some groups of workers will be able to plan a work–life balance in more creative ways (Handy 1994). For instance, one developing trend in the digital age is the possibility of more working roles being performed from home.

Homeworking allows valued employees to perform some or all of their responsibilities from home, via phone and the internet. In jobs that do not require regular contact with clients or co-workers, such as computer-based graphic design work, proof-reading or copy-writing for

publishing, employees find that working from home allows them to balance non-work responsibilities and perform more productively. The phenomenon of 'wired workers' has grown in recent years as digital technology creates new opportunities for changing the way we work.

Melissa Gregg (2011) argues that, for professionals, the advent of wireless mobile technological devices, such as smartphones, tablets and laptops, seems to offer more freedom alongside liberation from the fixed office environment. During the Covid-19 pandemic, as governments issued stay-at-home orders, many more people were encouraged to work from home if possible, and many did so, raising the question of whether homeworking could become the norm, at least for some businesses. For example, the CEO of Twitter announced that, if workers wanted to continue working from home 'forever', then the company would 'make that happen' (cited in Paul 2020). New homeworkers experienced some of its benefits, including 'days without long commutes, or the harsh inflexibility of not being able to stay close to home when a family member is sick' (Matt Mullenweg, cited in Hern 2020).

However, homeworking brings some new problems, among them the introduction of monitoring and surveillance techniques introduced into the home environment as employers look to keep track of workers. As work tasks move out of fixed buildings and set hours of working time, the boundary between work and private life is at risk of becoming eroded. The temptation increases for people to spend more time on work and for leisure and family time to shrink. Homeworking can enable work to become the centre of daily life at the expense of other dimensions (Felstead et al. 2005). Home-working allows for different ways of working, but it does not enable workers to escape their conventional work routines and pressures.

Digital technology enables more businesses to offer workers the opportunity to work from home.

The gig economy and unemployment

While new ways of working can present exciting opportunities for some, they can also produce deep ambivalence for others, who feel that they are caught up in a runaway world (Giddens 2002). As we have seen in this chapter, labour markets have undergone profound change with the shift away from manufacturing to service-based employment and the incorporation of information technology into workplaces. And though homeworking may be attractive, for many workers it is simply impossible. Insecure, precarious forms of work with few, if any, of the benefits of full-time jobs and careers have increasingly come to characterize certain sectors of the economy.

Insecurity in the gig economy

Job insecurity has become an important topic in the sociology of work in the twenty-first century. Some scholars see rising perceptions of job insecurity as linked to the flexible employment practices associated with post-Fordism (De Witte and Näswall 2003; Green 2009; Origo and Pagani 2009). The drive for efficiency and profit means that those with few skills – or the 'wrong' skills – find themselves in insecure, marginal jobs that are vulnerable to changes in global markets. We may even be seeing a shift in the very meaning of 'work'.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

17.4 Less work = a better life?

What happens when technological change destroys rather than creates jobs and there is not enough work to provide full-time employment and wages? Would this mean a return to mass unemployment, but this time as a structural characteristic of the new economy? And what would it mean for our understanding of the meaning of 'work'?

Because 'work' is associated with 'paid employment', it is difficult to see what alternatives might be possible in this scenario. In the 1980s, the French sociologist and 'post-industrial socialist' André Gorz (1923–2007) saw that emerging technological developments were paving the way to a future in which paid work will play a less important part in people's lives. Gorz based his view on a critical assessment of Marx's writings. Marx argued that the working class would lead a revolution that would bring about a more humane society, where work, or 'labour', would become satisfying rather than stultifying. Gorz rejected this forecast. Rather than the working class growing and leading a successful revolution, he saw that it was actually shrinking, as blue-collar workers became a declining minority of the labour force.

In this circumstance, it no longer makes sense to suppose that workers can take over the enterprises of which they are a part, let alone seize state power. There is no real hope of transforming the nature of paid work, because it is organized according to technical considerations that are unavoidable if an economy is to be efficient. 'The point now', as Gorz put it, 'is to free oneself from work' (1982: 67). This is particularly necessary where work is organized along Taylorist lines or is otherwise oppressive and dull.

Investment in new technology traditionally led to more full-time jobs, but investment in information technology leads to more automation and fewer jobs, as it allows fewer workers to produce

the same or more products. The result is likely to be a rejection of the 'productivist' outlook of Western society, with its emphasis on wealth, economic growth and material goods. A diversity of lifestyles, followed outside the sphere of permanent, paid work, will be pursued by a majority of the population in the future. Gorz (1985) approvingly cited the French trade union centre (CFDT) slogan: 'Less work for everyone means work for all … and a better life.'

According to Gorz, we are heading towards a 'dual society'. In one sector, production and political administration will be organized to maximize efficiency. The other sector will be a sphere in which individuals occupy themselves with a variety of non-work pursuits offering enjoyment and personal fulfilment. Perhaps more and more individuals will engage in life planning, by which they arrange to work in different ways at different stages of their lives.

How valid is this argument? Laker and Roulet (2019) report on several experiments with reducing workers' standard hours. At the start of the twenty-first century, France reduced these to 35 hours a week, while the Netherlands has an average working week of around 29 hours, but these are in a small minority at present. The London-based Wellcome Trust planned to introduce a four-day week for 800 staff but scrapped the plan as being 'too operationally complex to implement' (Booth 2019). Similarly, the American online education company Treehouse tried a four-day week in 2015 but went back to five days after laying off some staff to become more competitive (Rogoway 2016). Other businesses are still experimenting today.

That there are major changes in the nature and organization of work in the industrialized countries is beyond dispute. Yet, thus far, progress in the direction of freedom *from* work has been slight, and there have been rising levels of underemployment, job insecurity and casualization. Full-time paid work remains, for most, the key to generating the material resources they need to sustain a decent standard of living.

Job insecurity refers to the situation in which workers lack the assurance that their job will be stable and they can rely on continuing work over a period of time. Security of work means individuals can pay their rent, get a mortgage, take a holiday, buy consumer goods and generally make life plans. Without it, many of the basic expectations of modern life seem out of reach. For many workers, job insecurity is much more than a fear of redundancy. It also encompasses anxieties about the transformation of work itself and the effects of that transformation on health and personal life.

The rise in flexible working, temporary and short-term contracts, hyper-flexible 'on-call' and zero-hours working and part-time work have all been seen as contributing to increasing job insecurity, which has been rising since the mid-1960s (Burchell et al. 1999). In many countries, the development of a sector known as the gig economy, based on freelancing and casual hours of work, has kept official 'employment' figures high just as in-work poverty levels rise. The concept of a 'gig' is taken from the work of entertainment, where acts are booked for a specific date, time and length of performance. In the gig economy, the gig refers to work tasks that are 'typically short, temporary, precarious and unpredictable, and gaining access to more of them depends on good performance and reputation' (Woodcock and Graham 2020: 3). While, for some, adopting the entertainment term 'gig' to describe such work implies something positive or creative, this is both misleading and inappropriate, when a more accurate description of gig work is simply 'precarious' (Crouch 2019b: 6). With

this caveat, we will use 'gig economy' here as this is the most common characterization in the emerging literature.

Businesses in the gig economy treat workers as independent agents who are free to accept or reject the work tasks and payment offered by companies without committing to, or feeling any loyalty towards, a specific firm. In this sense, gig workers may experience a sense of freedom and even liberation from the traditional nine-to-five jobs in conventional labour markets. Yet the same freedom from wider obligations also exists for the online platform firms which do not provide sick pay, paid holidays or pension contributions, thereby negating some of the key in-work benefits secured by trade unions over many years.

[Global society 17.1](#) Gig work in Ghana and London

Since 2016, Jamie Woodcock has studied Deliveroo delivery riders in London, while since 2009 Mark Graham has carried out research with 'cloudworkers' in sub-Saharan Africa. Comparing gig workers in London and Ghana provides an insight into what this kind of work entails and how the gig economy covers both geographically situated work and work that takes place entirely across the internet.

In the first example below, the worker lives in London and juggles three jobs. In the second, an online freelance worker in Takoradi, Western Ghana, gets his gigs from [Upwork.com](#), an online platform matching employers' needs to workers who complete specific tasks.

1. The driver worked at two other jobs in addition to Deliveroo. In the morning he would wake up and go to the first job, trying to eat breakfast before he left. Over lunch he worked a shift for Deliveroo, making sure to grab something to eat on the way. In the afternoon he worked at the third job, before starting the evening shift at Deliveroo. The most challenging aspect of the work was making sure he ate enough food once he got home to ensure he had the energy to get up and repeat the process the next day.... His story is therefore a damning indictment of the realities of gig work in London: a worker struggling to eat enough calories to deliver food to people who are too tired from work to make their own.

2. After doing some freelancing work on Upwork at nights and weekends, he decided to take the plunge and quit his job in the local economy. He now completes a variety of tasks (including app testing, data entry, technical writing and search engine optimization). While these tasks are fairly varied, they have two things in common. First, they pay better than his previous job in Ghana. Second, he is rarely told what they are for, or why he is doing them.... While the pay is good, the pressures to deliver are extremely high. In the online freelancing world,

reputation is everything and workers are terrified of not receiving a five-star review from clients.... When contracts are obtained by workers, they often need to be carried out very quickly. As such, the worker we spoke to ended up working extremely long shifts. He described multiple 48-hour marathon working sessions without sleep, simply in order to not disappoint his clients. Despite these gruelling work conditions, he maintained a positive outlook on his work: optimistically recalling that the other job options in Takoradi are also not perfect.

Source: Woodcock and Graham (2020: 7–8).

THINKING CRITICALLY

From these two brief vignettes, what similarities and differences are immediately apparent between the cases? If, as some commentators suggest, many people actually *choose* to work this way, what benefits could there be – financial or otherwise – that may be attractive, despite the obvious downsides of working in the gig economy?

This platform business model has spread beyond the high-tech sector of the economy to numerous other firms, leading Srnicek (2016) to argue that we have entered the era of 'platform capitalism' and van Dijck et al. (2018) to theorize the emergence of the 'platform society'. This is because, in capitalist expansion, data have become a key resource that are collected and used to improve services and products and to sell on, all of which increases profits. Yet, there are clear dangers ahead as platform capitalism takes hold, not least the inevitable erosion of personal privacy and confidential information.

Indeed, Zuboff (2019) maintains that we are entering an era characterized by a new form of 'surveillance capitalism', in which the initial 'progressive' promise of the digital revolution has been 'usurped' by corporate interests. The rights of individuals to decide how their digital data are used and to maintain their privacy have been crushed by companies that now claim these data, and the knowledge derived

from them, as the raw material for their activities. The [Internet of Things](#) is at the forefront of this process, collecting personal data often in hidden ways that the new surveillance capitalists exploit to increase profits. For example, intelligent virtual assistants (IVAs) such as Amazon's Alexa and Microsoft's Cortana, Google's Nest brand, which markets smart thermostats, speakers, routers and much more, and Ring's doorbell and home-security devices are all examples of domestic products with embedded data collection. Zuboff argues that data is routinely collected, collated, analysed and used to predict consumer behaviour and increase sales. And though the digital revolution clearly facilitates the shift to a surveillance economy, it is still capitalism which drives the process forward.

Harvey et al. (2017) suggest that some forms of gig-sector work resemble very old forms of 'villeiny' from the Middle Ages, when agricultural workers or serfs paid lords a rent to farm their land with no guarantee of a regular income from it. Those subject to this arrangement were known as villeins. This study looked at self-employed personal fitness trainers who work from and pay rent to gyms without a guarantee of regular income and who thereby become bonded to the landlord and perform much unpaid or speculative work, such as just being around and engaging gym customers, that is of benefit to the gym. Harvey and his colleagues describe this type of arrangement as a form 'neovilleiny'. Other types of gig work are perhaps closer to the situation of day-labourers at the docks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Large groups of labourers looking for work on the docks would gather and wait to be selected for the loading or unloading of ships, but only those chosen could expect to be paid for that particular 'gig', which might have run to just a few hours or maybe a single day. Without guaranteed hours of work or a regular income, poverty was widespread. Contemporary gig work centred on platforms such as Uber has some similarity to the day-labouring on the docks, but it also differs in important ways from these earlier forms of casual work.

The digital technology of the internet, Wi-Fi and smartphones makes gig work and communications between 'employer' and worker more anonymous, flexible and immediate. For digital work, such as that

described in ['Global society' 17.1](#), the organization of gigs could involve clients, platforms and workers from diverse locations anywhere in the world and does not require co-presence. Second, many gig workers, at least nominally, *choose* to work this way rather than taking on formal work for a single employer in a fixed location. Given the stark imbalance of power between the parties and the possibility that turning down work that is offered will result in future offers drying up, the extent to which workers really do 'freely choose' gig work is questionable. As De Ruyter and Brown (2019) argue, 'the gig worker is usually required to be at the beck and call of the "employer". The relationship is seen as transactional, but is it equal?'

Yet some sociologists question whether job insecurity really is getting worse, suggesting that job tenure across the workforce as a whole may, in fact, be rising (Doogan 2009). Grint and Nixon (2016) argue that, since the 1970s, there has been an overall reduction in average job tenure, though this has not been dramatic. Estimates suggest that job tenure was around ten years in the 1970s and 9.5 years by 2000. Indeed, length of tenure for women has actually been increasing, though this may reflect recent changes in the previously male-dominated job market. Around 80 per cent of British workers had full-time employment and between one-quarter and one-third had been with the same employer for over ten years.

The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS 2019d: 5) reported a sharp rise in zero-hours contracts, from around 200,000 in 2010 to a high of 907,000 in late 2016, after which the trend stabilized somewhat, with 896,000 people reporting working on a zero hours contract in 2019. However, this represented just 2.7 per cent of all those in employment, and we should not see the experience of gig workers as representative or typical of general labour market conditions. Nonetheless, while such statistics may suggest that severe job insecurity is not the norm, perceptions of rising insecurity still tell us something of workers' concerns about technological and economic change and shifting labour markets.

Unemployment

The United Nations estimates that, globally, around 190 million people were unemployed in 2017, 5.5 per cent of the economically active population (UN 2019a: 13–14). Some 300 million working people also lived in extreme 'in-work' poverty and 60 per cent of workers were involved in some kind of informal work. It is the case that many people who are 'officially' unemployed are, in reality, employed or working in some capacity. Unemployment rates vary widely by region and country. For example, the rate in the European Union countries has been falling since 2000, down to 6.5 per cent by 2018. But, within this figure, Greece's rate was 18.5 per cent, Spain's 14.1 per cent and the Czech Republic's just 2.1 per cent (UN DESA 2019d: 3).

One notable feature of the unemployment statistics is that youth unemployment rates are consistently higher than the average in many different societies, from North Africa, Western Asia (particularly Turkey and Saudi Arabia) and Western Europe to South Asia (including Iran and India) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (taking in the Russian Federation and Ukraine). The ILO (2012) reported that, in 2012, Greece and Spain, countries that were most significantly affected by the 2008 financial crisis, recorded youth unemployment rates of more than 50 per cent, though these have now fallen. In 2018, the EU28 had an unemployment rate among young people of 14.9 per cent. In North Africa, rates were much higher, with Egypt, Tunisia and Algeria recording youth unemployment rates in excess of 25 per cent. South Africa's rate stood at 40 per cent and Nigeria's at over 35 per cent. As a region, sub-Saharan Africa had the highest youth unemployment rate, at 70 per cent (UN DESA 2019d: 3–4).

For young people, prolonged periods of early unemployment can have effects that last into the future, including lower wages, health problems and financial difficulties for families. For societies, the failure to integrate young people into the economy risks a loss of tax revenues, social stability and economic growth. Why should unemployment rates be higher for young people?

Vogel (2015: 4–6) argues that this is a multi-faceted problem. In many developed economies there are rising numbers of younger workers with good qualifications, but these tend to be non-vocational. This has resulted in a skills deficit for many industries and a mismatch between

labour supply and demand in relation to young workers. In addition, across the world there is the continuing growth of part-time, short-term and zero-hours contracts, which particularly affect young people trying to gain a foothold in the labour market. Reducing youth unemployment is therefore a complex task that will mean changes to education policies, employment legislation and business practices.

In the UK, concerns about young people who are not in education, employment or training (referred to in policy circles as NEETs) have become particularly acute. Youth unemployment in the UK rose continuously over the first decade of the twenty-first century ([figure 17.5](#)). Figures from the Department for Education (DfE 2015) showed that, in January 2015, the unemployment rate for young people aged sixteen to twenty-four was 12.3 per cent (738,000 people), more than twice as high as the overall unemployment rate. Unemployment is an even bigger problem for young black people: in 2010, almost half (48 per cent) were unemployed. Around one-quarter of all young unemployed people are also *long-term* unemployed, which means they have been out of work for one year or more (Cavanagh 2011).

Interpreting official unemployment statistics, both national and global, is not straightforward, and unemployment is not easy to define consistently. It means 'being out of work', but 'work' here means 'paid work' and 'work in a recognized occupation'. Yet some who are officially registered as unemployed may engage in other forms of productive activity, such as domestic work, painting the house or tending the garden. Many people are in part-time paid work or in paid jobs only sporadically, while students and retired people may be officially considered 'economically inactive' and not counted as 'unemployed', when in fact they are in some form of work or are looking for work.

General unemployment statistics are also complicated by the fact that they encompass two different 'types' of unemployment. *Frictional unemployment*, sometimes called 'temporary unemployment', refers to the natural, short-term entry and exit of individuals into and out of the labour market across the life course. *Structural unemployment*, by contrast, results from large shifts in the economy rather than circumstances affecting particular individuals.
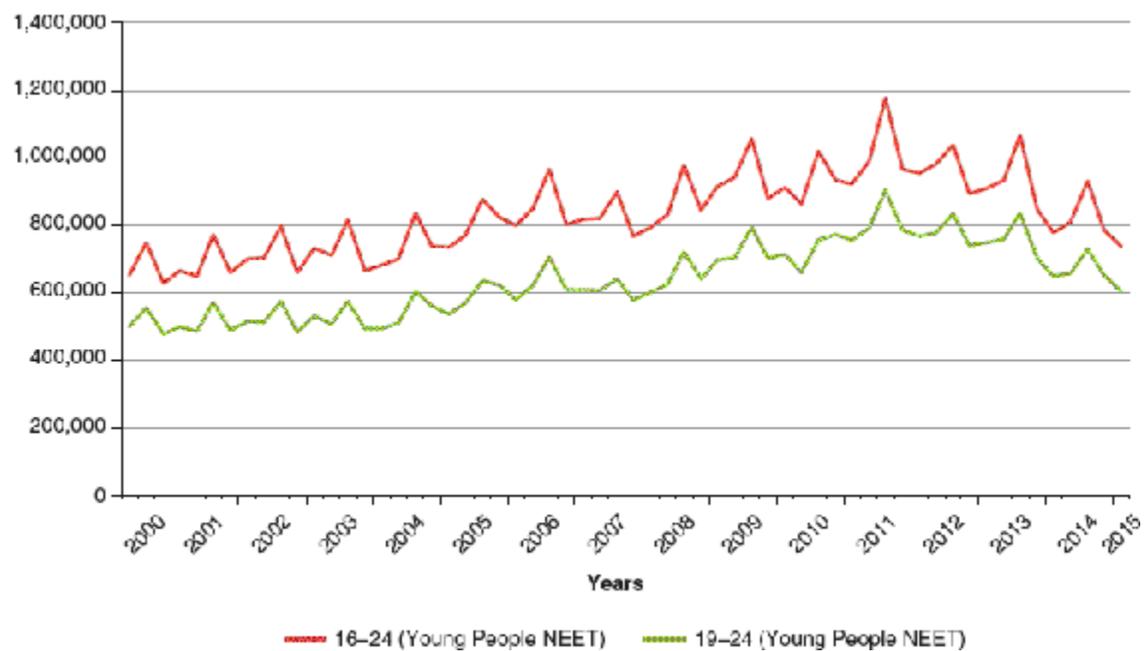
Figure 17.5 Young people not in education, employment or training, UK, 2000–15

Source: DfE (2015).

Global society 17.2 Offshoring the service sector?

The changing occupational structure today has to be viewed in a global perspective, as the production and delivery of many services now involve people working collectively across several national boundaries. In general, this is the result of firms in the Global North moving certain jobs to the Global South, where labour costs are lower, thus maintaining or improving profitability. India – which has many English speakers – has become a centre for banking transactions and contact centres; China is a major producer of toys, clothing and consumer goods; and Taiwan produces many of the electronic components needed in the digital age. This process has been called offshoring (sometimes 'outsourcing'), and, although it is by no means a recent development, there is much debate today on its future and consequences, particularly for the industrialized countries.

On one view, offshoring is simply another extension of international trade – it is just that there are now more things to trade and more places in which to trade. There is nothing special to be concerned about. On the second view, offshoring could in future be a major world-historical force that transforms the global economy and may be particularly worrying for the industrialized countries. A leading exponent of the second view is the American economist Alan S. Blinder (2006), who explains why governments in the Global North should be planning for a different future.

Blinder argues that manufacturing workers and firms in the relatively rich countries are used to competing with workers and firms in the Global South, but well-educated service-sector workers are not. Yet, in the future, Blinder forecasts, these service-sector workers will face the biggest challenge. A major divide is now emerging, which Blinder describes as that between those types of work that are 'easily deliverable down an electronic wire (or via wireless connections) without a loss of quality and those that are not'. For example, it is impossible to see German or American taxi

drivers or airline pilots losing out to offshoring, but it is possible to envisage those employed in typing services, security analysis, radiology services, accountancy, higher education, research and development, computer programming, banking services, and many, many more, doing so.

India has long provided a source of outsourced labour for British and North American companies in the form of call centres. Developments in technology are enabling a growing range of service jobs to be outsourced to companies employing young, educated middle-class Indians.

The big change here is that jobs requiring high levels of education are no longer 'safe', so the oft-repeated government mantra that developing a highly educated workforce is the key to the economy of the future could be mistaken. What may be required is to invest in those 'personal services' that have to be delivered face to face and thus can escape offshoring (so far). All other 'impersonal services' that can be delivered electronically are fair game. Because of this, Blinder suggests that the main challenge to developed countries

today is not China, which specializes in manufacturing, but India, which is better placed to take advantage of the movement of services offshore.

Blinder admits that his thesis is a form of speculation or 'futurology' and that much more research and evidence of current patterns is required, but the process he describes is clearly already under way. Given the continuing process of global integration, it seems that offshoring is here to stay.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Offshoring seems to mean the movement of jobs and work tasks from the wealthy Global North to the Global South. Why should this be seen as an urgent problem? Write a short essay supporting the idea that offshoring is helping to redistribute wealth and reduce global inequality.

In the UK, variations in the distribution of overall government-defined unemployment show that unemployment fell from 6 per cent in 2013 to 3.9 per cent in 2019 and that rates are higher for men than for women. In 2019 the rates for men and women were 4.1 and 3.6 per cent respectively (ONS 2019e: 8). However, more women than men work part-time hours; in May 2019 there were 2.32 million men working part-time but 6.34 million women, and more women report being on zero-hours contracts than men. The long-term trend is that the proportion of women working part-time is falling, from 83.7 per cent in 1992 to 73.6 per cent in 2019, while the trend for men is that a larger proportion now work part-time than in 1992 (ONS 2019g: 9–10).

Unemployment rates also differ widely according to ethnicity. While the rate for white people in 2018 was at the average of 4 per cent, the combined rate for all other ethnic groups was 7 per cent. The highest unemployment rates were 9 per cent for black people, 8 per cent for Pakistanis and Bangladeshis, and 7 per cent for the mixed ethnicity group (ONS 2019f). However, the Office for National Statistics also found that unemployment rates for all ethnic groups were lower in 2018 than in 2004 (table 17.1), with the largest falls over this period

recorded among the worst affected ethnic groups. For example, the unemployment rate for black people rose as high as 18 per cent in 2009 in the wake of the 2008 financial crash, before falling back to 9 per cent by 2018. The rate among Pakistani and Bangladeshi people also reached a high of 18 per cent in 2013 but had dropped to 8 per cent by 2018. The mixed ethnic group had an unemployment rate in 2013 of 16 per cent, which had fallen back in 2018 to 7 per cent. It remains to be seen how the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic will affect these and other unemployment figures.

Table 17.1 **Percentage of economically active population unemployed, by ethnicity, 2004–18**

Source: ONS (2019f).

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018
Ethnicity (%)															
All	5	5	5	5	6	8	8	8	8	8	6	5	5	4	4
Asian	9	9	10	10	9	11	11	–	12	12	9	8	7	7	6
Indian	7	7	8	7	7	9	8	–	10	9	6	7	5	6	4
Pakistani, Bangladeshi	13	13	15	15	15	17	16	–	17	18	14	12	11	10	8
Asian Other	9	8	8	9	7	9	9	–	10	9	8	7	6	6	6
Black	13	14	13	13	14	18	16	–	17	17	15	12	10	9	9
Mixed	12	12	11	12	13	14	15	–	16	16	13	11	11	7	7
White	4	4	5	5	5	7	7	–	7	7	6	5	4	4	4
White British	4	4	5	5	5	7	7	–	7	7	6	5	4	4	4
White Other	6	6	5	5	5	7	6	–	6	6	6	5	4	4	3
Other	11	11	13	10	11	12	13	–	14	13	10	9	7	8	8

Standing (2011) suggests that, in the twenty-first century, a new class grouping is emerging – a 'class in the making' – which he calls the precariat. This group consists of those who are unable to gain access to the labour markets which offer secure employment and decent wages. It includes older people, unskilled workers, young people with few qualifications, and all of those who regularly move into and out of work.

Standing sees the growing precariat participating in protests and demonstrations against austerity in Greece, Spain and the Middle East. The fitful involvement in paid work and resulting insecurity may be a source of discontent that national populist and fascist parties try to tap

into, encouraging people to see immigration or 'big' government as the cause of their precarious economic situation. The issue for government and policy-makers is how to tackle debilitating insecurities arising in the global economy that is increasingly reliant on flexible and hyperflexible working practices.

The future(s) of work

What will the world of work look like in the future? Wilkinson and Barry (2020: 4–6) list some of the more sensational headlines in recent articles about work futures, including: 'You Will Lose Your Job to a Robot – And Sooner Than You Think' (2017), 'Robot Automation Will "Take 800 Million Jobs By 2030"' (2017), 'The Future of Work: Could Automation be Positive?' (2018), and 'Artificial Intelligence WARNING: Can Intelligent Robots Replace Human Jobs by 2025?' (2017). The common concern across these pieces is technological change – in particular, robotics and artificial intelligence and their impact on jobs.

However, radical forecasts of what work *might* look like in the future have also been made in sociology at regular intervals, usually in response to emerging technological developments or macro-economic change. Today the latest forecasts are stimulated by rapid globalization and extensive offshoring practices, the digital revolution, and the rise of platform capitalism (Srnicek 2016), surveillance capitalism (Zuboff 2019) and the gig economy. Depending on the perspective, we could see many new work opportunities and the prospect of a better work–life balance (at last) or a world dominated by transnational capitalism, invasive digital surveillance via the Internet of Things, and casualized, insecure forms of work. It is clear that questions about the future of work are also questions about the future of societies, and we have scratched the surface of some of these issues and debates in this chapter.

Futurology often involves extrapolating currently disruptive trends long into the future, and it can be exciting and attractive. Yet its conclusions very rarely match the more mundane social reality as those trends develop and change. For example, Alvesson (2013) found that fast-food businesses, such as McDonald's and KFC, still employed more workers than did the high-tech digital sector of Google, Facebook and others. Similarly, the recent focus on gig work and zero-hours contracts, with their very real and well-evidenced inequities, should be set in perspective alongside statistical evidence showing that zero-hours work covers less than 3 per cent of the workforce (ONS 2019d).

Wilkinson and Barry (2019: 3) argue that, 'While scholarly research produces less exciting headlines than futurology, it also leads to more sober and nuanced assessments.'

Globalization and the introduction of AI, robotics and digital technology into workplaces are bringing about some significant changes to patterns of work and employment. However, a realistic assessment of how far these developments will actually transform working life must also take account of continuities and counter-trends. It may be rather less 'exciting', but an important part of sociology's remit is to understand society as it exists and not to let broadbrush speculation run too far ahead of what the evidence on the ground will support.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. Provide some definitions of 'work'. How might work be said to differ from 'employment'?

2. Describe some reasons for the decline in trade union membership since the 1970s. Is there any prospect of this trend going into reverse?

3. Describe the main aspects of Taylorism, Fordism and post-Fordism. In what ways has 'flexibility' been embedded into production, consumption and the workplace?

4. What is the difference between horizontal and vertical occupational segregation? Provide some real-world examples of each.

5. How can domestic labour be considered essential to the economy? Has domestic labour become more equally shared among opposite-sex couples?

6. Sociologists have identified a long-term trend towards the feminization of work. Using evidence from the chapter, explain why this does not mean that gender equality has been achieved.

7. What is meant by the 'knowledge economy'? How are AI, robotics and digital technology changing the world of work? Will these developments upskill or deskill the workforce?

8. Following Wright-Mills's notion (see [chapter 1](#)), unemployment is both a 'personal trouble' and a 'social problem'. Explain what is meant by this statement.

9. In what ways is work in the modern economy becoming more precarious for some sections of the workforce, especially those working in the gig economy? What could governments do to improve working conditions?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

Job insecurity has become a significant part of the sociology of work, and many studies have looked at its impact on people's health and well-being. But is this phenomenon restricted to working-class jobs and those involved in the expanding, casualized gig economy? Are the middle classes and those who work in the professions immune from such insecurities? The article below discusses these questions in relation to Britain. Read the piece and try the questions that follow.

Gallie, D., Felstead, A., Green, F., and Inanc, H. (2017) 'The Hidden Face of Job Insecurity', *Work, Employment and Security*, 31(1): 36–53.

1. What kind of study is this? What are the main sources of data used here?

2. Outline the two forms of job insecurity discussed. How do these connect to social class position?

3. According to the authors, is job insecurity rising or staying roughly the same?

4. Outline the effects on job insecurity of trade union recognition, employee participation and labour market conditions.

5. The authors argue that, in some respects, their findings differ significantly from those in earlier research. In what ways?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

The ideas of André Gorz on the radical impact of information technology on production and working lives were discussed above. Here is Wassily Leontief's parable of the declining significance of work (cited approvingly in Gorz 1985):

> Adam and Eve enjoyed, before they were expelled from Paradise, a high standard of living without working. After their expulsion they and their successors were condemned to eke out a miserable existence, working from dawn to dusk. The history of technological progress over the past 200 years is essentially the story of the human species working its way slowly back into Paradise. What would happen, however, if we suddenly found ourselves in it? With all goods and services provided without work, no one would be gainfully employed. Being unemployed means receiving no wages. As a result until appropriate new income policies were formulated to fit the changed technological conditions everyone would starve in Paradise.

Read 'Using your sociological imagination' 17.4 on Gorz again. Among your own circle of family, friends and acquaintances, have any of them downsized or moved to part-time work and lower pay in order to enjoy more freedom to do other things? What obstacles lie in the way of everyone wanting to do this? Suggest some ways in which the state could facilitate the transition to a society with less work.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Since the 1960s, the British director Ken Loach has made many movies, almost all of which have been categorized as 'social (or socialist) realist'. Much of this body of work deals with class divisions and social inequality through explorations of, among other things, childhood and masculinity (*Kes*, 1969), working-class life under capitalism (*Riff-Raff*, 1991) and the state social security system (*I, Daniel Blake*, 2016).

Loach's 2019 film *Sorry We Missed You* tackles life in the gig economy through the trials of Ricky (a self-employed delivery driver), Abby (an agency care worker) and their family. Although the film was critically acclaimed, online forums also contain many negative comments about its tone and approach to the subject: 'neo-miserabilist', 'predictably depressing', 'dull', 'unrelentingly grim', and so on. Watch the film with these criticisms in mind.

Does a social realist film on this subject simply have to be 'predictably depressing' if it is to represent reality faithfully, or is it really making a political statement about contemporary capitalism? With this in mind, write a 1,000-word review of the film which also draws on some of the research into working life in the gig economy.

Further reading

One of the most widely used and referenced textbooks on the sociology of work is Keith Grint and Darren Nixon's (2016) excellent *The Sociology of Work: An Introduction* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity). Stephen Edgell and Edward Granter's (2020) *The Sociology of Work: Continuity and Change in Paid and Unpaid Work* (3rd edn, London: Sage) does exactly what it should – namely, it tries to make sense of the shifting nature of paid and unpaid work. John W. Budd's (2011) *The Thought of Work* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press) is an engaging study of what work is and what it means.

Michael Noon, Paul Blyton and Kevin Morrell's (2013) *The Realities of Work: Experiencing Work and Employment in Contemporary Society* (4th edn, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan) looks at the experience of work from the viewpoint of employees. Viviana A. Zelizer's (2017 [1997]) *The Social Meaning of Money: Pin Money, Pay Checks, Poor Relief and Other Currencies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) is an excellent historically oriented account of differing and gendered forms of 'money' in society. A useful assessment of how far the casualization of work might go is Colin Crouch's (2019) *Will the Gig Economy Prevail?* (Cambridge: Polity).

A very good collection of essays is *The Sage Handbook of the Sociology of Work and Employment* (2016), edited by Stephen Edgell, Heidi Gottfried and Edward Granter (London: Sage).

@ **Internet links**

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Center for the Study of Economy and Society – research centre at Cornell University, USA:
www.economyandsociety.org/

The International Labour Organization – campaigns for decent work for all. Many useful resources here:
www.ilo.org/global/lang--en/index.htm

The Work Foundation, UK – Lancaster University-based organization engaged in 'high quality applied research':
www.lancaster.ac.uk/work-foundation/

Economic Sociology and Political Economy – the group's Facebook page for the latest news, books and articles in this field:
www.facebook.com/EconSociology

European Commission – Employment, Social Affairs and Inclusion pages with many helpful resources and statistics on work:
https://ec.europa.eu/social/home.jsp?langId=en

Independent Workers of Great Britain – some interesting cases here illustrating the changing face of trade unionism:
https://iwgb.org.uk/page/about-us

CHAPTER 18

RELIGION

CONTENTS

Afirst glance the image above could be a religious congregation in a modern place of worship. It is certainly a congregation; the people meet here once a month to sing and listen to talks from the stage, but there is no overtly 'religious' content. This is one of around seventy non-religious Sunday Assemblies across eight countries. The founders of the assembly movement wanted to 'do something that was like church but totally secular and inclusive of all – no matter what they believed.'

Founded in London in 2013, Sunday Assemblies seek to celebrate life, to promote help and support for others, and to 'create' community', embodied in their motto: 'Live better, help often, wonder more'. Although the assemblies welcome people with or without religious beliefs, in themselves they have no doctrine or set texts and no deities; 'We don't do supernatural, but we also won't tell you you're wrong if you do.' Their secular agenda is set out in the assembly charter, which says that 'The Sunday Assembly is a celebration of the one life we know we have' (sunday assembly.com/our-mission/). Nonetheless, the movement adopts some conventions of existing religion, such as meeting on Sundays, rituals (albeit secular ones), communal singing

(usually pop songs) and periods of quiet reflection. Bullock (2018) argues that these assemblies are a form of 'non-religion' that, nevertheless, draws on existing religious resources for its rituals and practices.

Sunday Assemblies may also appeal to those who appreciate the value of the traditional, communal elements of religious congregation but no longer consider themselves religious or have never had any religious beliefs. In this way, as the chair of the Edinburgh Assembly notes, the assembly is essentially 'a church with no religion' (BBC News 2018c). But is this true? If the Sunday Assembly is a secular gathering, why does it adopt a conventionally religious structure? Is the focus on creating community, doing good work and celebrating life the basis for a secular, humanistic form of religion? And what is 'religion' anyway? Why is religion still pervasive in apparently secular human societies? This last question has exercised many sociologists of religion since the work of Emile Durkheim.

In this chapter we shall look at some of the varied religious beliefs, practices and organizations as well as the main sociological theories of religion and empirical studies of religious practice. Throughout, we will consider the fate of religion primarily, though not exclusively, in relation to the Global North, partly for reasons of space but also because it is here that traditional religions appear to be in long-term decline.

The sociological study of religion

The sociology of religion places special demands on our sociological imagination as we look to understand the diversity of beliefs and rituals found in human societies. This means we have to be sensitive to the ideals that inspire profound conviction in believers, yet at the same time we must be relatively detached from our personal beliefs. Sociologists confront ideas that seek the eternal, while recognizing that religious groups also pursue very mundane goals, such as acquiring finance or gaining followers. We also need to recognize the diversity of religious beliefs and modes of conduct and to probe into the nature of religion as a general social phenomenon.

What is religion?

Defining religion seems to be such a simple task as to merit no deep thought. Religions are commonly defined by a belief in God or gods and perhaps an afterlife, but they also involve worship in religious buildings – temples, churches, synagogues or mosques – and doing 'religious things' such as praying and eating or not eating certain foods. For sociologists trying to set limits to their field of study, reaching general agreement on such a basic matter has proved extraordinarily difficult. Indeed, Aldridge (2013: 22) argues that 'We cannot expect to agree on a definition and then debate matters of substance, since matters of substance are built into any definition. There is not, and never will be, a universally agreed definition of religion.'

One reason for this is that sociology contains numerous theoretical perspectives, and these differ in how they construe the nature of social reality. As a consequence, they also disagree about how that reality can and should be studied. For example, many macro-level studies adopt a realist view which sees religion as a fundamental social institution that transmits values, a moral code and norms of behaviour across generations. Hence 'religion' exists objectively and has real effects on individuals. Alternatively, several other micro-level studies are rooted in a more social constructionist position, which focuses on the ways in

which what constitutes 'religion' is continually reproduced and changed in everyday interaction processes.

Sports fans, such as football supporters, exhibit some of the characteristics attributed to religions. Yet football supporting also differs in significant ways from traditional religions.

In general terms, competing sociological definitions of religion can be divided into three types: *inclusive definitions, exclusive definitions* and *definitions in use.* Inclusive definitions tend to be functionalist in orientation, viewing religion as central to human life as such and, in some ways, as functionally necessary for society. An example is the following: 'religion is a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with the ultimate problems of human life' (Yinger 1970: 7). Others refer to religion as all of those beliefs about the forces that shape human destiny (Lenski 1963). On this view, religion provides people with answers to enduring questions of existence, offers hope, and helps to bind people together in solidarity.

The main problem with inclusive definitions is they tend to include *too* much. That is, they imply that everyone is implicitly religious, whether or not they acknowledge it. As all humans face the same 'ultimate problems' of dying, death and the search for meaning, then they should all 'be' religious in some way. Even apparently secular political

ideologies and regimes, such as communism, or leisure pursuits, such as supporting football teams, have been interpreted as forms of 'religion', because they represent systems of belief and practice that help people to find meaning in the world. However, critics suggest this stretches the definition of religion to everyone and removes key questions such as whether religion is growing or declining (Aldridge 2013).

By contrast, *exclusive* definitions reject the functionalism of inclusive ones, instead looking to define religions by reference to the substance of their varied beliefs. In particular, exclusive definitions are rooted in the idea that all religions make a distinction between a worldly empirical reality and a 'super-empirical' or transcendent reality (Robertson 1970). Adopting this distinction means that many groups and institutions – such as football supporters or political ideologies – are effectively excluded on the grounds that they make no reference to a transcendent reality. This has the benefit of limiting what counts as religion, allowing sociologists to address the extent of secularization – the process in which religion gradually loses its influence over all of the various spheres of social life – through empirical research. However, the attempt to produce a single definition to encompass all known religions relies on a very broad concept of the 'super-empirical', which is less applicable to new religious movements. The distinction between empirical and super-empirical realities reflects its origins in Western social science.

The third type of definition is described as a 'definition in use' and is similar to what today we call social constructionism. For many sociologists, a social constructionist approach offers a better starting point than the previous two. Rather than assuming that there is a real phenomenon called religion and then exploring the varied ways in which it is manifest in society, constructionism sees it as more productive to investigate all of those situations in which people themselves make reference to 'religion' or 'religious meaning' and engage in self-defined 'religious' practices. This means that sociologists do not need to wrestle with the problem of devising their own universal definition; it is enough to investigate how religion has been and is being used by a whole range of individuals, groups and organizations and

how those uses have been challenged. Constructionist studies look at how the meaning of religion has changed over time, how people use the concept for their own purposes, and whether that use is increasing or diminishing.

See chapter 5, 'The Environment', chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', and chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life', for discussions of the social constructionist approach.

A problem associated with all 'definitions in use' is that they do not set out a clear boundary between religious and non-religious phenomena, accepting that all of those things considered 'religious' by people themselves are legitimate subjects for research. Yet, for constructionists, this lack of definitional clarity is not debilitating for empirical research. On the contrary, Beckford (2008: 21) argues that

> uncertainty about what religion really is does not pose a problem to social scientists: it merely challenges them to understand how so many human beings still manage to navigate life without achieving certainty about religion or religious issues…. Social scientists therefore search for clear and robust reasons for the strong religious convictions that they observe in some cases. Neither religious confusion nor religious certainty can be regarded as natural or given in the nature of things.

Over time, both inclusive and exclusive definitions have lost ground to more social constructionist approaches to the study of religion.

As you read through the different theories outlined in the section that follows, consider which of the three types of definition is being used. You should also think about what the different perspectives have to say concerning the role of religion as a continuing source of identity, the way that organized religions handle changing gender relations and sexualities, how religious belief and practice are manifested at the

individual level, the turn towards fundamentalism in some religious groups, comparisons across nations and religions, and the changing organizational forms that religion takes.

Sociologists and religion

Professional sociologists may have a religious faith or they may not, but in their sociological work they are unconcerned with whether specific religious beliefs are true or false. For example, they may ask how a religion is organized, what its principal beliefs and values are, how religious organizations are related to the larger society, and what explains their successes and failures in recruiting and retaining members. The issue of whether a particular belief is 'true', however important that may be to those involved, is not something sociologists can address. Of course, as private individuals, they may well have an opinion, but as sociologists they take steps to prevent these from influencing their research and its findings.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
>
> If sociology is a scientific discipline based on the assessment of evidence, can sociologists also have a religious faith? What problems might 'religious sociologists' encounter in the sociology of religion? How might a religious faith be helpful for sociologists in this field?

In practice, sociologists have been especially concerned with religious organizations, which are some of the most important in society. Within Christianity and Judaism, religious practice often occurs in formal organizations – churches and synagogues – though this is not necessarily true of Asian religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, where religious practices are just as likely to occur in the home and other informal settings. In the Global North today, many religions have become established through bureaucratic organization. We will also see later that some sociologists view religions as essentially similar to business organizations, competing for members and resources (Warner 1993).

Sociologists have often seen religions as important sources of social solidarity. Religious beliefs, rituals and collective worship help to create a 'moral community' in which all the members know how to behave towards one another. However, religion has also been a factor in destructive social conflicts, such as those between Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims in India, clashes between Muslims and Christians in Bosnia, and 'hate crimes' against Jews, Muslims and other religious minorities in the United States and Europe. The question of whether religion *per se* produces harmony or conflict is, for contemporary sociologists, a historical and empirical one, and the classical founders were the first to tackle such questions in a sociological manner.

The classical sociology of religion

None of the three main founders of sociology – Marx, Durkheim and Weber – was devout, and they all thought that traditional religions would be gradually eroded as science and reason effectively 'disenchanted the world'. However, their detailed explanations of how and why this would occur are markedly different, and we outline their central ideas in turn.

Karl Marx: religion and inequality

Marx's ideas on the role of religion in society were derived mainly from some early nineteenth-century theological and philosophical writers. One of these was Ludwig Feuerbach (1804–72), whose most famous work was translated as *The Essence of Christianity* (1957 [1853]). According to Feuerbach, religion consists of ideas and values produced by human beings in the course of their cultural development, which they mistakenly project onto divine forces or gods. Because human beings do not fully understand their own history, they tend to attribute long-established, socially created values and norms to the activities of supernatural beings or 'spirit'. For instance, in Judaism and Christianity, the story of the Ten Commandments given to Moses by God is a mythical version of the origin of moral precepts which govern the lives of Jewish and Christian believers.

If we fail to understand the origins of the religious symbols we have created, Feuerbach argues, we are condemned to be prisoners of forces

we do not control. Feuerbach uses the term [alienation](#) to describe the creation of gods or divine forces distinct from human societies. The result is that human values and ideas become transferred onto gods and spirits. Feuerbach saw that understanding religion as a form of alienation promises great hope for the future. Once human beings recognize that religious powers are really their own, those values become capable of realization on Earth, rather than being deferred to an afterlife.

Marx accepted Feuerbach's view that religion represents human self-alienation. And though it is often thought that Marx was entirely dismissive of religion, this is far from true. Religion, he writes, is the 'heart of a heartless world' – a haven from the harshness of the daily realities of capitalism. In Marx's view, religion in its traditional form will, and should, disappear; yet this is because the positive values embodied in religion can become guiding ideals for improving the lot of humanity on Earth, not because those ideals and values are themselves mistaken.

Marx declared, in a famous phrase, that religion is the 'opium of the people'. Religions such as Christianity defer happiness and rewards to the afterlife, teaching the resigned acceptance of existing conditions in this life. Attention is thus diverted away from inequality and injustice by the promise of what is to come. Hence, religion has a strong ideological element: religious beliefs and values often provide justifications for inequalities of wealth and power. For example, the teaching that 'the meek shall inherit the Earth' suggests an attitude of humility and an acceptance of worldly oppression.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Do religions always support the status quo? Find some examples from across the world where religions have been critical of or have opposed the dominant social order. Are these just exceptions, or was Marx wrong about religion?

Emile Durkheim: religious rituals and solidarity

In contrast to Marx, Emile Durkheim spent a good part of his later career studying religion. Durkheim's sociological theory of religion, like his work on suicide (see chapter 1), was of immense significance in establishing the discipline of sociology. It demonstrated that any subject could be approached from a sociological perspective but also that, without sociology, we are likely to misunderstand social life. This perspective on religion is discussed in 'Classic studies' 18.1.

Durkheim's functionalist approach focuses our attention on the relationship between religion and other social institutions, and this was taken forward in the twentieth century by the founder of structural functionalism, Talcott Parsons. Parsons was interested in the role and fate of religion in modern societies, and his central ideas are covered in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Max Weber: the world religions and social change

While Durkheim based his arguments on a very small number of cases, Max Weber embarked on an enormous project, studying the major religions of the world. No scholar before or since has undertaken such a huge task. Most of his attention was concentrated on what he called the *world religions* – those that have attracted very large numbers of believers and decisively affected the course of global history. He made detailed studies of Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism and ancient Judaism (1951, 1952, 1958b, 1963), and, in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1992 [1904–5]) and elsewhere, he wrote extensively about the impact of Christianity on the history of the West. He did not, however, complete his projected study of Islam, which was left to later scholars (Turner 1974, 1993).

Weber's writings concentrate on the connection between religion and social change, something to which Durkheim paid little attention. Weber also disagreed with Marx, arguing that religion is not principally or necessarily a conservative force. On the contrary, religiously inspired movements have often produced dramatic social transformations. For example, Protestantism – particularly in its Puritan forms – was the original source of the capitalistic outlook found in the modern West, and it revolutionized attitudes towards profit-making and tradition. The early entrepreneurs were mostly Calvinists, and their drive to

succeed, which helped initiate economic development, was originally prompted by a desire to serve God. Material success was for them a sign of divine favour.

Weber saw his research on the world religions as a single project. His discussion of the impact of Protestantism on the development of the West is part of a comprehensive attempt to understand the influence of religion on social and economic life in different cultures. Analysing the 'Eastern' religions, Weber concluded that they provided insuperable barriers to the development of industrial capitalism. This is not because these civilizations are 'backward'; they have simply developed values that are different from those which came to dominate in Western Europe.

[Classic studies 18.1](#) The elementary forms of the religious life

The research problem

There are many religions across the world, some very old, such as Islam, Confucianism, Christianity and Hinduism, and some more recently developed, such as Scientology, which dates only from the 1950s. What, if anything, do they have in common? What is it that allows us to discuss them as 'religions' rather than, say, philosophies of life? And how should we address such questions sociologically? Durkheim (1965 [1912]) suggested that the most productive method for discovering the essential character of religion was to investigate its simplest form, within small-scale, traditional societies – hence the title of his classic study, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), one of the most influential studies in the sociology of religion.

Durkheim's explanation

Unlike Marx, Durkheim does not connect religion primarily with social inequality or power but instead relates it to the overall nature of the institutions of a society. He based his work on a study of [totemism](#) as practised by Australian Aboriginal societies, arguing that totemism represents religion in its most 'elementary' form. In this quite uncluttered form, it becomes easier to discern the crucial defining features of religion.

A 'totem' was originally an animal or plant taken as having particular symbolic significance for a social group. Totems are sacred objects, regarded with veneration and surrounded by various ritual activities. Durkheim defines religion in terms of a distinction between the [sacred](#) and the [profane](#). Sacred objects and symbols, he holds, are treated as being apart from the routine aspects of existence, which constitute the realm of the profane. Eating the totemic animal or plant, except on special ceremonial occasions, is usually forbidden, and, as a sacred object, the totem is believed to have divine properties which separate it from other

animals that might be hunted or crops that are gathered and consumed.

But *why* is the totem sacred? According to Durkheim, it is because it is a symbol representing the social group itself which stands for the central values of the community. It follows that the reverence which people feel for the totem actually derives from the respect they hold for central social values. In religions, the real object of worship is society itself.

Durkheim emphasized that religions are never just matters of belief. All religions involve regular ceremonial and ritual activities in which the group of believers meets together. In collective ceremonials, a sense of group solidarity is heightened and affirmed in what Durkheim called collective effervescence – the heightened feeling of energy generated in collective gatherings and events. Ceremonials take individuals away from the concerns of their profane social lives and into an elevated sphere in which they feel in contact with higher forces. These higher forces – attributed to totems, divine influences or gods – are in reality the expression of the influence of the collectivity over the individual. Nonetheless, people's religious *experience* should not be dismissed as mere self-delusion, for it is indeed the *real* experience of social forces.

Religious rituals, such as Buddhist Wesak ceremonies, mark out the spiritual from the mundane, the sacred from the profane, but in doing so they also reinforce key social values.

In Durkheim's view, ceremony and ritual are essential in binding members of social groups together. This is why they are found not only in regular situations of worship but also in various life crises, when major social transitions such as birth, marriage and death are experienced. In virtually all societies, ritual and ceremonial procedures are observed on such occasions. Durkheim reasons that collective ceremonials reaffirm group solidarity at a time when people are forced to adjust to major changes in their lives. Funeral rituals demonstrate that the values of the group, and the group itself, outlive the passing of particular individuals, thus providing a means for bereaved people to adjust to their altered circumstances. Mourning is not simply the spontaneous expression of grief, though of course it is for those personally affected by a death. Mourning is also a duty imposed by the group.

In small-scale cultures, Durkheim argued, almost all aspects of life are permeated by religion. Religious ceremonies do reaffirm existing social values, but they can also be the source of new ideas and categories of thought. Religion is not just a series of sentiments and activities but actually conditions the modes of thinking within traditional cultures. Even the most basic categories of thought, including how time and space are thought of, were first framed in religious terms. The concept of 'time', for instance, was originally derived from counting the intervals involved in religious ceremonies.

With the development of modern societies, the influence of traditional religion begins to wane. Scientific explanations increasingly replace religious ones and ceremonial and ritual activities shrink, coming to occupy a much smaller part of people's lives. Durkheim agrees with Marx that the older forms of religion are slowly disappearing. He wrote that 'The old gods are dead.' Yet he also says that religion, in somewhat different forms, is very likely to continue. Even modern societies depend for their cohesion on rituals that reaffirm their values, and new rituals can be expected to emerge. Durkheim is quite vague about what these might be, but it seems he has in mind the celebration of the individual in humanist and political values such as freedom, equality and cooperation.

Critical points

One strand of criticism of Durkheim's thesis focuses on the argument that it is possible to understand the essential character of all religions by generalizing from a few small-scale societies. But critics maintain that it seems unlikely that Aboriginal totemism is typical of the large-scale, multinational world religions, casting doubt on what can be learned about the latter by studying the former. Over the course of the twentieth century many of the world's societies became culturally more varied, with a diverse range of religions existing within a single national society. Some think that Durkheim's thesis of religion as a source of the continual re-creation of social solidarity is less persuasive in multi-faith societies and does not properly account for intrasociety conflicts involving competing religious beliefs.

We may also take issue with the basic idea that religion is essentially the worship of society rather than deities or spirits. This has been seen as a reductionist argument that religious experience can be brought down to social phenomena, thus rejecting even the possibility of a 'spiritual' level of reality. Therefore, for people with strong religious beliefs and commitment, Durkheim's argument will probably always appear inadequate.

Contemporary significance

By locating religions firmly *within* the social realm rather than outside it, Durkheim effectively demystified religious experience and laid the ground for later empirical studies of religions. As we will see later in this chapter, the emergence of new religious movements and alternative forms of spirituality bear out the functionalist theory that, although the old gods may be dying, new ones are being created as societies undergo significant change. If so, then we may well agree with Durkheim that 'there is something eternal in religion which is destined to survive all the particular symbols in which religious thought has successively enveloped itself' (1965 [1912]: 427).

Weber notes that in traditional China and India there was, in certain periods, significant development of commerce, manufacture and urbanism, but this did not generate the radical patterns of social change produced by the rise of industrial capitalism in the West. Religion in the East was therefore a major influence inhibiting such change, seen, for instance, in Hinduism. Weber called Hinduism an 'other-worldly' religion – that is, its highest values emphasize escape from the toils of the material world onto a higher plane of spiritual existence. The religious feelings and motivations produced by Hinduism do not focus on controlling or shaping the material world. On the contrary, Hinduism sees material reality as a mere veil hiding the true concerns to which humankind should be oriented. Confucianism also acted to direct effort away from economic development as this came to be understood in the West, emphasizing harmony with the world rather than promoting an active mastery of it. Although China was, for a long time, the most powerful and culturally most developed civilization in the world, its dominant religious values were a brake on any commitment to economic development purely for its own sake.

Weber regarded Christianity as a 'salvation religion', involving a belief that human beings can be 'saved' if they adopt the beliefs of the religion and follow its moral tenets. The ideas of sin and being rescued from sinfulness by God's grace are important in this, as they create a tension and emotional dynamism that is absent from the 'Eastern' religions. Salvation religions have a 'revolutionary' aspect. While the religions of the East cultivate an attitude of passivity towards the existing order, Christianity involves a constant struggle against sin which can stimulate revolt against the existing order of things. Religious leaders – such as Jesus – emerge, who reinterpret existing doctrine in such a way

as to challenge the prevailing power structure. This conclusion is quite different from Marx's perspective on the ideological role of Christianity under capitalism.

Critical assessment of the classics

Marx, Durkheim and Weber looked for general characteristics of religion as such, something that most sociologists of religion today now see as a somewhat misguided enterprise. Yet we can learn something quite generic about religions from all three founders. Marx's view that religion often has ideological implications, justifying the interests of ruling groups at the expense of others, can be seen in the influence of Christianity on European colonialism. Christian missionaries who sought to convert 'heathen' peoples to Christian beliefs were no doubt sincere, but the effect of their teachings was to reinforce the destruction of traditional cultures and impose colonial rule. The various Christian denominations almost all tolerated, or endorsed, slavery in the United States and other parts of the world up to the nineteenth century. Doctrines were developed claiming that slavery was based on divine law, with disobedient slaves being guilty of an offence against God as well as their masters.

Yet Weber was also right to emphasize the unsettling and often revolutionary impact of religious ideals on the established social order. Despite their early support for slavery in the United States, many church leaders later played a key role in the fight to abolish it. Religious beliefs have motivated people to join social movements seeking to overthrow unjust systems of authority. Religion played a prominent part in the civil rights movements of the 1960s in the United States and the Solidarity movement in 1980s Poland, which opposed and helped eventually to overthrow communist rule.

Among the most valuable aspects of Durkheim's writings is his stress on ritual and ceremony. All religions involve regular assemblies of believers during which rituals and rules are observed. As he rightly points out, ritual activities also mark the major transitions of life – birth, entry to adulthood (rituals associated with puberty are found in many cultures), marriage and death. The use of ritual and ceremony can be seen, too, in many aspects of what are otherwise secular events

and occasions, such as the state opening of Parliament or university graduations.

All three of the classical founders forecast that religion, or at least the traditional world religions, would lose ground over time and the modern world would be an increasingly secular place. However, as we shall see below, this pithy statement has proved to be deceptively simple, and the 'secularization debate' continues to rumble on after more than a century of research and theorizing.

An emerging secular age?

In the sociology of religion, secularization refers to social processes through which religion gradually loses its influence over all of the various spheres of social life. For instance, a widely used and simple measure of secularization is declining weekly church attendance. While in Britain, France and the Netherlands this fell steadily and significantly over the twentieth century, it seems to have stabilized at around 5 per cent of national populations (Kaufman 2007). Large numbers of people within most European countries report that they never attend church services other than on special occasions such as weddings and funerals (see figure 18.1). On the other hand, numerous surveys have consistently shown that religious belief has not fallen quite as dramatically as church attendance, which might support the characterization of Western Europe as a region of 'believing without belonging' (Davie 1994; see figure 18.2).

Davie has since suggested that, where a small, active minority performs religious activities on behalf of and with the tacit approval of the non-active majority, this is better expressed as vicarious religion. Vicarious religion describes the position in the Nordic countries, which traditionally have high levels of church membership but low levels of attendance (Bäckström and Davie 2010: 191). But this concept has also come in for criticism. Bruce and Voas (2010) argue that it does not give any insight into how those who are not involved in organized religion (and are not 'for' or 'against' it) actually perceive religion. They also maintain that the mounting evidence of secularization is not challenged by vicarious religiosity.

What are we to make of these often contradictory pieces of evidence? In the most basic terms, the debate on weekly church attendance is typical of the disagreement between supporters of the thesis, who see religion diminishing in power and importance, and opponents, who argue that religion remains a significant force, albeit often in new and unfamiliar forms. This debate is fleshed out in more detail in the next section.

The sociological debate

There is little consensus on what should be measured in debates on secularization and how this should be done. Should we focus on attendance in church, expressed religious beliefs, the power and influence of church leaders, or something else? And how can these be accurately measured? Moreover, as we have seen, sociologists employ differing definitions of religion, and these inevitably influence arguments for and against secularization. As a result, some debates in this area have involved researchers talking past rather than engaging with each other (Hanson 1997).
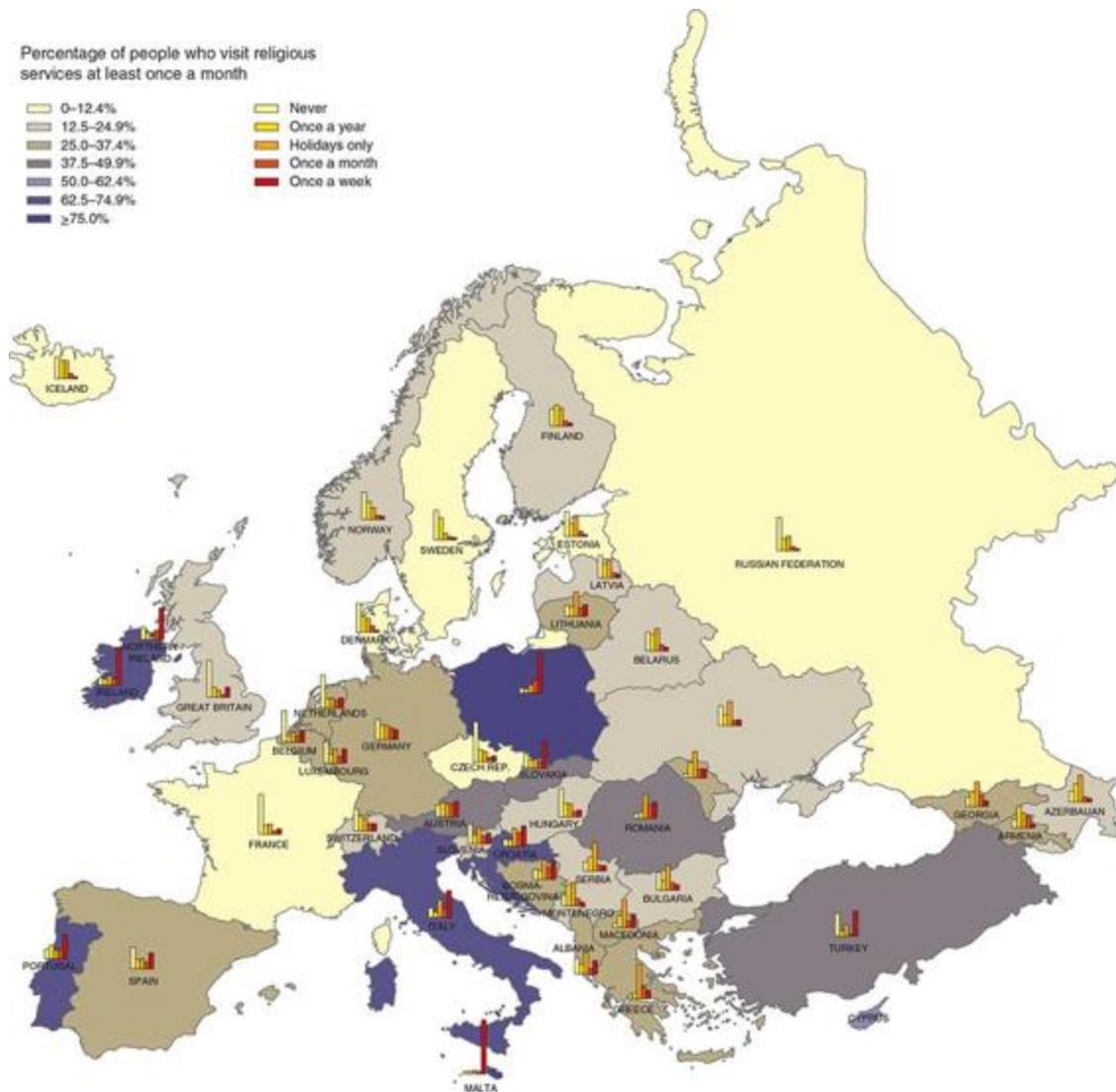
Figure 18.1 Percentage of people attending religious services, European countries, 2018

Source: European Values Study (2018).

Secularization can be evaluated on several aspects or dimensions. Some of them are quantitative measures, such as the *level of membership* of religious organizations. Statistics and official records can show how many people belong to a church or other religious body and are active in attending services and other ceremonies. With the exception of the USA, most of the industrialized countries have experienced considerable secularization according to this index, including predominantly Catholic countries such as France and Italy. More Italians than French attend church regularly and participate in the

major rituals, such as Easter communion, but the overall pattern of declining membership of the established Christian churches is similar in both cases.
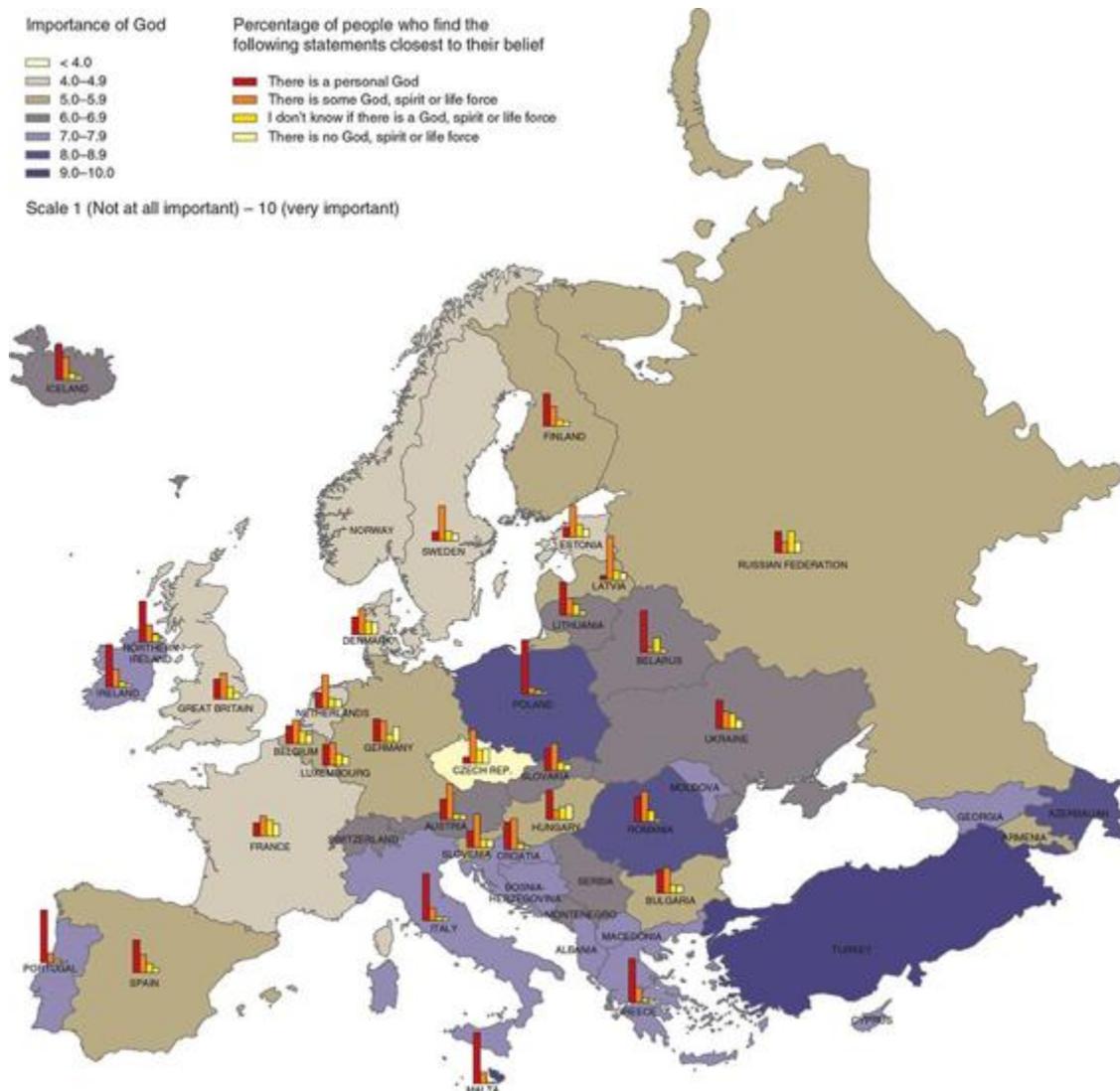
Figure 18.2 Belief in God, spirits or life force, European countries, 2018

Source: European Values Study (2018).

A second dimension of secularization concerns how far churches and other religious organizations maintain their *social influence, wealth* and *prestige*. In earlier times, religious organizations wielded considerable influence over government and commanded respect in the community. Over the twentieth century, religious organizations progressively lost much of the social and political influence they had previously held. The

trend is also global, but with some exceptions. Church leaders can no longer assume their views will be influential with powerful political groups. While some established churches remain very wealthy and new religious movements may rapidly build up fortunes, the material circumstances of many longstanding religious organizations are quite insecure. As attendance and membership have fallen, churches and other places of worship have been sold or remain in a state of disrepair.

The third dimension of secularization concerns beliefs and values. We can call this the dimension of *religiosity*. Levels of churchgoing and the degree of social influence of churches are not necessarily a direct expression of the beliefs or ideals that the majority of people hold. Many people with religious beliefs do not regularly attend services or take part in public ceremonies; conversely, regularity of attendance or participation does not always imply the holding of strong religious views. People may attend church out of habit, to join social networks, or because their families and communities expect it of them.

As socio-economic development generates increasingly higher living standards, religiosity tends to decline, and, conversely, religious belief remains stronger in circumstances of deprivation and hardship. We can see this illustrated in tables 18.1 and 18.2, which show the proportions of people identifying themselves as 'a religious person' and 'a convinced atheist' across a sample of fifty-seven nations (excluding the UK). Some of the most religious countries are also some of the poorest, while a majority of the most atheistic are based in some of the world's wealthiest developed economies (WIN-Gallup 2012: 3). We do need to be careful when interpreting such statistical evidence, however, as the meaning of 'atheism' is not universal or clear, particularly in comparative surveys. For instance, Japan appears to be less religious and more 'atheistic' than most other countries. Yet Buddhists who regularly attend a temple, may also, and quite legitimately, tell researchers that they 'do not believe in God' as this is no part of their religion. This does not make them 'atheists' to be counted along with those who have no religious beliefs or connection to religious groups.

Table 18.1 Ten most religious populations based on self-identification as 'a religious person', 2012 (percentages)

Source: WIN-Gallup International (2012: 4).

Countries	A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	Don't know/no response
Ghana	96	2	0	1
Nigeria	93	4	1	2
Armenia	92	3	2	2
Fiji	92	5	1	2
Macedonia	90	8	1	1
Romania	89	6	1	3
Iraq	88	9	0	3
Kenya	88	9	2	1
Peru	86	8	3	3
Brazil	85	13	1	1

Alongside other dimensions of secularization, we need an accurate understanding of the past to see how far religiosity has declined. Supporters of the secularization thesis argue that, in the past, religion was far more important in people's daily lives than it is today and that the church was the centre of local life. Critics of the thesis contest this idea, arguing that, in medieval Europe, commitment to religious belief was weaker and less important in daily life than has previously been supposed. Research into English history, for example, shows that ordinary people had only a lukewarm commitment to religion, while religious sceptics have been found in most cultures, particularly in the larger traditional societies (Ginzburg 1980).

Table 18.2 Ten most atheistic populations, based on self-identification as 'a convinced atheist', 2012 (percentages)

Note: There are eleven countries listed here because of four tying at 10 per cent.

Source: WIN-Gallup International (2012: 4).

Countries	A religious person	Not a religious person	A convinced atheist	Don't know/no response
China	14	30	47	9
Japan	16	31	31	23
Czech Republic	20	48	30	2
France	37	34	29	1
South Korea	52	31	15	2
Germany	51	33	15	1
Netherlands	43	42	14	2
Austria	42	43	10	5
Iceland	57	31	10	2
Australia	37	48	10	5
Ireland	47	44	10	0

Yet there is also much evidence that the hold of religious ideas today is less than was generally the case, particularly if we include the whole range of the supernatural and magical. Most people in the Global North do not experience the everyday environment as being permeated by divine or spiritual entities which intervene directly in their lives. Taylor argues that some advanced societies may be entering a genuinely secular age in which many or even a majority of their populations see no need for religion or spirituality. In Taylor's (2007: 19) words, 'A secular age is one in which the eclipse of all goals beyond human flourishing becomes conceivable; or better, it falls within the range of an imaginable life for masses of people.' However, it seems unlikely that the mass of people will shift directly from religious belief to secular atheism. Rather, the transition to a wholly secular age may involve a period in which traditional religions are in decline but people still have a sense that 'there is something out there'. As Heelas (2015: 438–43) argues, the big question raised here is whether secular societies can ever be 'self-sufficient' without recourse to religious beliefs or spirituality beyond what is known scientifically. Or is the secular realm

simply 'insufficient' for most people to live with and the desire for something 'beyond' material existence will always exist?

In a comparative study exploring Christian beliefs and atheism in Britain, Sweden and the USA, Heelas (2002) found that atheists and agnostics made up only 24 per cent (1990), 15 per cent (2000) and 6 per cent (1986) of adults respectively. Only 10 per cent (Britain), 2 per cent (Sweden) and 20 per cent (USA, 2000) were regular church attenders. But the large majorities between these two poles – what Heelas calls 'betwixt and between' – included those who believed in 'a higher power', held 'New Age' beliefs or were simply indifferent to questions of religious belief. At best, people in this middle zone could be described as exhibiting a 'fuzzy fidelity' to Christian beliefs and traditions (Voas 2009).

Yet just as likely is that 'fuzzies' may not have recognizably religious beliefs at all; rather, they may just have views and opinions about the world in general and their place within it. If so, then against Davie's (1994) notion of Britain being a nation of 'believing without belonging', it may be that a majority of people in Britain and elsewhere in Europe neither believe *nor* belong (Voas and Crockett 2005: 14; Bruce 2011: 9). However, as we saw in the introduction, the Sunday Assemblies dispense with religious belief but continue to encourage and cater for those looking for a non-religious collective gathering. In this sense they may represent an early form of 'belonging without believing', in what Bullock (2108) describes as a 'post-Christian' transitional period.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Design a small research study which aims to test the theory that people do not shift directly from religious belief to atheism. What would be your sample population and how would you recruit them? What questions would you ask of your participants to gather the relevant data?

[Beyond the secularization thesis?](#)

Although the thesis of secularization in Europe and other industrialized economies is well supported, both theoretically and empirically, there have been many criticisms of it. For example, it has been suggested that sociology has tended to elide the analytical concept of secularization with a predictive version that sees the process as globally inevitable. While the analytical concept remains useful, the predictive version has faltered in the face of many empirical examples – not least the USA – of the continuing strength of religious affiliation (Pérez-Agote 2014).

Here, we introduce two alternative perspectives which neither query nor reinterpret the statistical evidence. Instead, both suggest that sociology has focused too heavily on the formal, institutional aspects of established religion and, in so doing, has tended to ignore or downplay religion and spirituality as it is actually practised and experienced in everyday life. Once we shift our focus onto the latter, a quite different picture of 'religion' emerges. Looking at 'religious practices', such as the (Godless) Sunday Assemblies in our chapter introduction and among other voluntary associations and individuals, calls into question some of the basic assumptions underlying the sociology of religion and offers a different way of thinking about what religion is.

The rise of the tribes?

The French sociologist Michel Maffesoli suggests an alternative assessment of secularization. Drawing on Durkheim's ideas of religion as a form of worship of society and its moral rules, Maffesoli (1995) theorizes that, although traditional religions may be in decline, people in large urban areas increasingly live in the 'time of the tribes'.

Maffesoli argues against sociological theories of a growing individualization, as in the work of Giddens and Beck. Individualization refers to the process through which people identify less with collective bodies and instead are 'cut loose' from social structures such as trade unions, social classes and even families. In this situation, personal choice becomes a key value and individuality is prized, as seen in the practice of consumerism, as people buy 'identity kits' in the form of clothing, music, interior décor, and so on, all of which help them to forge an individual identity (Bauman 2007).

However, Maffesoli also argues against older theories of a mass society, which suggested an increasing social uniformity and the loss of individual differences. Instead, he suggests that modern societies are characterized by the rapid growth of small groupings of people who voluntarily band together on the basis of shared musical tastes, ideas, consumer preferences, leisure pursuits, and so on. He calls these groups 'neo-tribes' ('new' tribes). They are quite like traditional tribal groups, because they have a shared identity, but unlike them, because they do not last as long. People's commitment to neo-tribes tends to be quite weak and short-lived, which makes them very fluid and fragile social entities.

Comic-con events bring together people who share a leisure interest in dressing in the outfits of superheroes and villains. For Maffesoli, this is just one of many neo-tribes in contemporary societies which facilitate the individual's need for sociability.

Maffesoli's point is that neo-tribes show there remains a very strong human need and a quest for close social contact and interaction, which supports neither the theories of heightened individualization nor those of a mass society. And this deep, underlying search for human

sociability is, in Durkheim's terms, a religious search. With this in mind, Maffesoli argues that the old gods may well be dead but, as Durkheim (1965 [1912]: 427) put it, there is still 'something eternal in religion'. Maffesoli's ideas suggest that the debate on secularization need not be quite as polarized as it has become. Secularization does seem to be impacting on the older world religions, but, if we know where to look, new forms of religious expression are also emerging.

Everyday 'lived religion'

The sociology of religion has had much to say about organized religion and its functions in society, and we shall discuss this body of work in the rest of this chapter. But recent empirical studies of individual religious practice show that, in the pursuit of generic definitions and theories of religion, sociologists may have largely ignored the creative blending of 'religious' and 'secular' elements by individuals trying to make sense of their place in the world. When they have looked into individual religious practices, sociologists have tended to view their apparently contradictory internal diversity as illustrative of the problems brought by excessive individualism in society.

One key study here is the survey of 'privatized' religion in the USA by Robert Bellah and his colleagues (2008 [1985]). The authors argue that America has seen a long-term movement away from a unified, public form of religion, which helped to bind people together, towards extraordinarily diverse and private forms of religion. The latter reflect a wider social process of individualization. This study presents the case of a young nurse called Sheila Larson as indicative of this shift in religious practice. Sheila explained that her personal 'faith' was very important to her, but it was not the kind of coherent, church-oriented religion we might expect. She said: 'I believe in God. I'm not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice…. It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think He would want us to take care of each other' (ibid.: 221).

Bellah et al. note that, on the basis of such individualized expressions of faith, there could be '220 million American religions'. However, they

argue, such a radically privatized situation does not contribute to social solidarity, nor can it support a unified public realm. The danger is that it will produce very abstract and shallow forms of religious life. But is this assessment coloured by the institutional focus of the conventional sociology of religion? Maguire (2008) argues that it is. In particular, the assumption underlying the critique is that religions are or should be unified and organized and embody a consistent set of beliefs and rituals. Maguire sees this as a Western image of what religions are, which prevents sociologists from properly understanding the apparently randomly selected collages of belief and practice that characterize many individual lives, such as that of 'Laura' in 'Global society' 18.1.

Maguire (2008) suggests that, to an outsider, Laura's choices may appear to lack any internal logic or religious coherence. Yet, to the individual concerned, each element of their do-it-yourself construction or *bricolage* fits together quite logically into a personally meaningful whole. For example, the substance of Sheila Larson's 'Sheilaism' was clearly connected to personal crises in relation to her health and her experience as a nurse caring for dying patients. In advance of major surgery, for instance, Sheila claims to have heard reassurances directly from God, and the fact that 'caring for each other' was central to her faith is explicable in relation to such information. For Maguire (and others) there is a need to attend to the complexities of such everyday lived religion if we are to grasp the changing relationship between religion, society and the individual.

[Global society 18.1](#) Living a personal religion

Consider the case of 'Laura' below, a well-educated woman in her late thirties who worked from home as an author and part-time reading consultant for schools in the area. Laura was one of the individuals interviewed by Meredith Maguire (2008: 9–11) as part of an empirical research project in the USA looking at religious practices and beliefs.

Laura

Laura … was raised Catholic and considered herself to be Catholic still, although she seldom attended Mass and then just to please her mother when visiting her several times a year. At the same time, however, she spoke of nurturing her spiritual life, and she described how she set aside at least an hour daily for meditation as the first priority for her morning as soon as her children left for school.

Her home altar held several traditional religious items, including a family heirloom cross brought from Mexico three generations ago, pictures of several deceased or distant loved ones, eighteen candles of all sizes, a small bouquet of wildflowers, and an amulet (*milagro*) attached to the frame of one grandmother's photo … There were numerous and prominent non-traditional items as well: amethyst crystals used in healing meditations, Asian incense and a Tibetan prayer bell, a large colourful triptych of Frida Kahlo [a Mexican painter], and a modern representation of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a young Chicana in running shoes …

Laura described deeply important practices that produced a comfortable blend of elements of her identity. For example, she explained that she respects her mother's more traditional Mexican American religious practices, including popular religious practices such as devotions to *la virgincita* (the dear Virgin), but she identifies with them in a transmuted form….

At the same time, however, Laura's own religion was very different from her mother's … She was an avowed feminist, proud of her Mexican heritage and her bilingual fluency and closely linked with her extended family, and she cared a lot about the well-being and education of children (her own children, her students, and those who read her books). All these commitments and concerns were interwoven into her religious practices, at home, in church, or while going about her everyday activities, including her writing and her frequent interactions with her extended family.

THINKING CRITICALLY

If Laura is entirely comfortable with her blend of beliefs and practices, what does this tell us about the future for the traditional churches? Durkheim saw religions as sustaining *social* solidarity. Construct an argument in favour of the proposition that individualized expressions of religiosity (such as Laura's) can still perform this function.

Evaluating the secularization thesis

In a long-term perspective, religion in the traditional churches has declined in most Western, industrialized countries – the most notable exception to this being the USA. The influence of religion in these countries has diminished along each of the three dimensions of secularization, much as nineteenth-century sociologists predicted it would. However, as we have seen, individuals and groups still practise 'religion', but in ways that have remained largely invisible to the predominantly quantitative research methods in sociological surveys.

What we can conclude, therefore, is that the position of religion in the Global North is much more complex than the secularization thesis originally suggested. Religious and spiritual beliefs remain powerful, motivating forces in many people's lives, even if individuals do not choose to worship formally through the framework of traditional church organizations. Many people do have religious beliefs but prefer to practise and develop their faith outside institutionalized forms of religion. And, even if secularization could be measured according to

membership figures alone, this should also include the growing role of non-Western faiths and new religious movements. In Britain, for example, active membership within traditional churches is falling, yet participation among Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, Jews and evangelical 'born-again' Christians remains dynamic.

There is also much less evidence of secularization outside the Global North. In many areas of the Middle East, Asia, Africa and India, fundamentalist Islamist groups challenge Westernization. When the pope toured South America, millions of Catholics enthusiastically followed his progress. Eastern Orthodoxy has been re-embraced by many people in parts of formerly communist societies of Eastern Europe, even after decades of repression of the Church. It seems that the secularization thesis may be most powerful in terms of explaining the declining power and influence in society of the traditional churches, which are trying to adapt to equal rights movements.

Religion in the contemporary world should be evaluated against a backdrop of globalization, instability and increasing diversity. It is not surprising, then, that during times of rapid change many people look for and find answers in religion. Fundamentalism is perhaps the clearest example. Yet, increasingly, religious responses to change occur in new and unfamiliar forms: new religious movements, neo-tribes, cults, 'New Age' activities and individual 'bricolage'. While most of these may not look much like conventional forms of religion, they may more accurately reflect some major transformations which are occurring in religious belief and practice today.

Religious organizations and movements

As we have seen, there do seem to be important shifts occurring in religious adherence across the countries of the Global North. Yet the bulk of sociological studies of religion have focused on the functions of religion and the role played by religious groups and organizations, and it is therefore important to look at how sociologists have understood the various types of organization and movements that are rooted in religious belief.

Organizing religion

Sociologists of religion have studied a wide variety of religions, but it is also true to say that there has frequently been a tendency to view all religions through concepts and theories that grew out of the analysis of the European experience. For example, concepts such as *denomination* or *sect* presuppose the existence of formally organized and established religious institutions. This leads some scholars to argue that these concepts are of limited use when studying religions outside Europe and the Western societies. In recent decades, there has been an effort to create a more systematic, comparative sociology of religion which seeks to understand religious traditions from within their own frames of reference (Wilson 1982; Van der Veer 1994).

Early theorists such as Max Weber (1963), Ernst Troeltsch (1981 [1931]) and Richard Niebuhr (1929) described religious organizations as falling along a continuum based on the degree to which they are established and conventional. Churches lie at one end, as they are conventional and well established, while cults lie at the other, as they are neither conventional nor established. Sects fall somewhere between these two opposites. These distinctions were based on the study of European and North American religions, and there is much debate about how well they apply to the non-Christian world.

Although we introduce the concepts of *sect* and *cult* in our historical sketch below, these terms were used by early sociologists of religion; today they have acquired negative connotations in society, and most

contemporary sociologists try to avoid using them. Instead the tendency is to use the phrase *new religious movements* to characterize novel religious organizations which lack the respectability that comes with being well established over a long period of time (Hexham and Poewe 1997; Hadden 1997).

THINKING CRITICALLY

Should sociologists avoid using the concepts of 'cult' and 'sect', just because they have acquired a negative association? Is this an example of 'reflexivity' (see Giddens's definition in chapter 3), or is it a form of censorship? List some other instances where sociologists have abandoned, or may have to dispense with, concepts that were previously common currency.

Churches and sects

All religions involve communities of believers, but there are many different ways in which these are organized. One way of classifying religious organizations was first suggested by Max Weber and the religious historian Ernst Troeltsch. Weber distinguished between churches and sects as ideal types that allow sociologists to make sense of organized religion.

Focusing on Christianity, Weber argued that a church is a large, well-established religious body – such as the Catholic Church or the Church of England. A sect is a smaller, less well-organized group of committed believers, usually created in protest against what a church has become, as was the case with Calvinists and Methodists in the past. Troeltsch argued that churches normally have a formal, bureaucratic structure with a hierarchy of religious officials and tend to represent the conservative face of religion, since they are integrated into the existing institutional order. Most of their adherents become members of the church. Some have questioned whether this typology is still relevant today. For example, Bruce (1996) notes that leaders of established churches have often been highly critical of government policies, and it is clear that, in the context of globalizing social relations and culturally diverse societies, membership is much reduced and European Christian

churches are less likely to conform to the ideal-typical model above (Sengers 2012).

Sects are comparatively small; they usually aim at discovering and following 'the true way' and tend to withdraw from the surrounding society into their own form of community life. Sect members regard the established churches as corrupt. Most have few or no officials, as all members are regarded as equal participants. A small proportion of people are born into sects, but most actively join them. A tragic example of a sect built around an inspirational leader came to light in the USA in 1993. David Koresh led the Branch Davidian sect, claiming to be a 'messiah'. He was also allegedly stockpiling illegal weapons in the group's compound in Waco, Texas. Up to eighty members of the Davidians, including nineteen children, burned to death as fire engulfed their complex when it came under assault by officials from the US government after a lengthy armed stand-off. Controversy remains over whether the fire was ordered by Koresh, who reportedly preferred mass suicide to surrender, or whether the actions of the federal authorities caused the tragedy.

Denominations and cults

The church/sect typology has been further developed by others. Howard Becker (1950) added two further types: the denomination and the cult. A denomination is a sect which has 'cooled down' to become an institutionalized body rather than an active protest group. Sects which survive over a period of time often, though not always, become denominations. Thus Calvinism and Methodism were sects during their early formation, when they generated great fervour among members, but over the years they became gradually more 'respectable'. Denominations are recognized as more or less legitimate by churches and quite often cooperate harmoniously with them.

Cults resemble sects but have different emphases. Cults are the most loosely knit and transient of all religious organizations, being composed of individuals who reject what they see as the main values of the wider society. Their focus is on individual experience, bringing like-minded individuals together. People do not formally join but follow particular theories or prescribed ways of behaving, and members are usually

allowed to maintain other religious connections. Like sects, cults quite often form around an inspirational or charismatic leader, though over time they may develop into religious movements.

It is worth noting that the term 'cult' has been used by states to classify religious groups that deviate from the mainstream, and what is seen as a cult in one country may well be established religious practice in another. As Barker (2010: 199) argues, 'one person's cult is likely to be another person's religion.' When Indian gurus (religious teachers) bring their beliefs into Europe, what might be considered an established religion in India is regarded as a cult in the UK. Christianity began as an indigenous cult in ancient Jerusalem, and Evangelical Protestantism is regarded in many Asian countries today as a cult imported from the West.

We should therefore try to avoid seeing cults *per se* as somehow strange and alien. Hadden (1997) points out that *all* of the 100,000 or so religions that humans have ever devised were once new, and most, if not all, were initially despised cults from the standpoint of respectable religious beliefs of the time. After all, Jesus was crucified because his ideas were so threatening to the established order of the Roman-dominated religious establishment of ancient Judaea.

[Religious movements](#)

Religious movements are associations of people who join together to spread a new religion or to promote a new interpretation of an existing religion, and we can see them as a special form of social movement (see [chapter 20](#), 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'). They are larger than sects and have a less exclusive membership, though, like the church/sect distinction, movements and sects (or cults) are not always clearly distinct from one another. In fact, all sects and cults can probably be classified as types of religious movement. Examples of religious movements are groups that founded and spread Christianity in the first century, the Lutheran movement that split Christianity in Europe about 1,500 years later, and the groups involved in the more recent Islamic Revolution.

Religious movements tend to pass through certain phases of development. In the first phase, the movement derives its life and cohesion from a powerful leader. Max Weber classified such leaders as *charismatic* – that is, they are perceived as having inspirational qualities capable of capturing the imagination and devotion of followers. Charismatic leaders in Weber's formulation could be political as well as religious figures – revolutionary China's Mao Tse-tung as well as Jesus and Muhammad. The leaders of religious movements are usually critical of the religious establishment and seek to proclaim a new message. In their early years, religious movements are fluid; they do not have an established system of authority. Their members are normally in direct contact with the charismatic leader, and together they spread the new teachings.

The second phase occurs following the death of the leader. Rarely does a new charismatic leader arise from the masses, so this phase is crucial. The movement is now faced with what Weber termed the 'routinization of charisma', a process that often begins while the original charismatic leader is still alive. To survive, it has to create formalized rules and procedures, since it can no longer depend on the individual qualities of the leader in organizing followers. Many movements fail to achieve this and fade away when their leaders die. A movement that survives and takes on a permanent character tends to develop into a church. In other words, it becomes a formal organization of believers with an established authority system and established symbols and rituals. The church itself might, at some later point, become the established norm against which other movements that question its teachings set up in opposition or from which they break away completely. In this way, we can see a dynamic cycle of religious development.

New religious movements

Although traditional churches have experienced a decline in membership over recent decades, we will see below that other forms of religious activity have been growing. Sociologists use the term new religious movements (NRMs) to refer collectively to the broad range of religious and spiritual groups, cults and sects that have emerged alongside the larger mainstream religions. Barker (1999) notes that, for pragmatic reasons, NRMs may be seen as those that have risen to

visibility (that is, are 'new') since 1945 and attempt to provide answers to the big 'religious' questions such as 'Is there a God?' or 'Is there life after death?'.

New religious movements encompass an enormous diversity of groups, from spiritual and self-help groups within the New Age movement to forms of global 'Jihadi-Salafism' associated with the political violence of Islamic State/*Daesh* and al-Qaeda (Meijer 2009) and exclusive sects such as the Hare Krishnas (International Society for Krishna Consciousness), who worship the Hindu deity Krishna as the source of all forms of 'God'. At the end of the twentieth century, Barker (1999) reported that one database contained some 2,000 religious groupings, most of which could be considered as NRMs.

Many new religious movements are derived from the major traditions of Hinduism, Christianity and Buddhism, while others have emerged from traditions virtually unknown in the West. Some are essentially the creations of the charismatic leaders who guide their activities. This is the case, for example, with the Unification Church, founded in South Korea in 1954 and led by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon (hence adherents have been colloquially called 'Moonies'), who is seen by supporters as a messiah. Adherents of new religious movements, particularly in the Global North, tend to be relatively well educated and from middle-class backgrounds.

New religious movements can be seen as falling into three broad categories: world-affirming, world-rejecting and world-accommodating movements (Wallis 1984). Each is based on the relationship of the individual group to the larger social world, and, though they are relatively small compared with the world religions, the rise of these movements may be seen as reflecting some aspects of wider social changes, such as the decline in automatic deference to experts and established authorities among younger generations. Sociological interest in new religious movements stems from the 1960s and 1970s, when they were viewed as challenging mainstream social values and were linked to the moral panic about the supposed 'brainwashing' of young people.

World-affirming movements

[World-affirming movements](#) are more akin to self-help or therapy groups than to conventional religious groups. They often lack rituals, churches and formal theologies, turning their focus on members' spiritual well-being. As the name suggests, world-affirming movements do not reject the outside world or its values. Rather, they seek to enhance their followers' abilities to perform and succeed in that world by unlocking human potential.

The Church of Scientology is one example, widely known today because of the involvement of celebrities such as the actors Tom Cruise and John Travolta. Founded by L. Ron Hubbard, a successful science fiction novelist in the early 1950s, the Church of Scientology has grown from its original base in California and has a large membership around the world. Scientologists believe we are all spiritual beings but we have neglected our spiritual nature. Through training that makes them aware of their real spiritual capacities, people can recover forgotten supernatural powers, clear their minds and achieve their full potential.

Many strands of the [New Age movement](#) come under the category of world-affirming movements. The New Age movement emerged from the counter-culture of the 1960s and 1970s and encompasses a broad spectrum of beliefs, practices and ways of life. Pagan teachings (Celtic, Druidic, Native American and others), shamanism, forms of Asian mysticism, Wiccan rituals and Zen meditation are only a few of the activities that are thought of as 'New Age'.

On the surface, the mysticism of the New Age movement stands in stark contrast to the modern societies in which it is popular. Yet New Age activities should not be interpreted as simply a radical break with the present society or mainstream religions. They are part of a larger

cultural trajectory. In the Global North, individuals possess unparalleled degrees of autonomy and freedom to chart their own lives. As McGuire (2008) found in her extensive interviews, many people now combine aspects of New Age spirituality and practices such as meditation and healing with conventional religious tenets drawn from Christianity, Buddhism and other world religions. In this respect, the aims of the New Age movement coincide closely with the modern age: people are encouraged to move beyond traditional values and expectations and to live their lives actively and reflexively.

World-rejecting movements

In contrast to world-affirming groups, world-rejecting movements are highly critical of the outside world and often demand significant lifestyle changes from their followers. Members may be expected to live ascetically, to change their dress and hairstyle, or to follow a certain diet. World-rejecting movements are frequently exclusive in contrast to world-affirming movements, which tend to be inclusive in nature. Some display similar characteristics to total institutions; members are expected to subsume their individual identities into that of the group, to adhere to strict ethical codes and rules, and to withdraw from activity in the outside world.

Many world-rejecting cults and sects have come under the intense scrutiny of state authorities, the media and the public. Certain extreme sects have attracted much concern. For example, the Japanese group Aum Shinrikyo ('supreme truth') released deadly sarin gas into the Tokyo subway system in 1995, injuring hundreds of commuters and killing twelve people. Seven leaders of the cult were executed in Tokyo in 2018 for their part in the attack, and many countries now designate the group as a terrorist organization.

World-accommodating movements

The third type of new religious movement is closer to a traditional religion. World-accommodating movements emphasize the importance of the inner religious life above worldly concerns. Members of such groups seek to reclaim the spiritual purity that they believe has been lost in traditional religious settings. Where followers of world-rejecting and worldaffirming groups alter their lifestyles in accordance with their

religious activity, many adherents of world-accommodating movements carry on in their everyday lives and careers with little visible change. One example of a world-accommodating movement is Pentecostalism, which emphasizes the individual's direct experience of God. Pentecostalists believe that the Holy Spirit can be heard through individuals who are granted the gift of 'speaking in tongues'.

THINKING CRITICALLY

How do *religious* movements differ from *secular* political and social movements, such as socialism, feminism and environmentalism? Write a short piece supporting the idea that religious and social movements are essentially similar and should be studied using the same theoretical and conceptual tools.

Various theories have been advanced to explain the popularity of new religious movements. Some scholars have argued that they should be seen as a response to the process of liberalization and secularization. People who feel that traditional religions have become ritualistic and devoid of spiritual meaning may find comfort and a greater sense of community in smaller, less impersonal religious movements. Others point to new religious movements as an outcome of rapid social change (Wilson 1982). As traditional social norms are disrupted, people search for both explanations and reassurance. The rise of groups which emphasize personal spirituality, for example, suggests that many individuals feel a need to connect with their own values or beliefs in the face of instability and uncertainty.

New religious movements are one recent development, but not the only one. In many national contexts, religious beliefs and practices have undergone changes as a result of fresh challenges such as the development of religious fundamentalism, globalization and multiculturalism, internal movements for gender and sexuality equality, and, of course, secularization. The next section traces some of these shifts, focusing on Europe and North America.

Contemporary religion: trends and challenges

In global terms, religions, religious beliefs and religious practices today are increasingly diverse, making generalizations about the fate of 'religion', as such, unwise. With this in mind, the final part of the chapter presents some significant trends and challenges faced by religions under conditions of globalization.

Christianity, gender and sexuality

Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1815–1902), an American campaigner for women's rights, argued that the deity had created women and men as beings of equal value, and the Bible should fully reflect this fact. Its 'masculinist' character, she believed, reflected not the authentic word of God but the fact that the Bible was written by men. When a colleague opened a women's rights conference with a prayer to 'God, our Mother', there was a fierce reaction from church authorities. Yet she pressed on, organizing a Women's Revising Committee in America, composed of twenty-three women, to advise her in preparing *The Woman's Bible*, which was published in 1895. The Anglican Church hierarchy is still largely dominated by men, but this is changing today.

Churches and denominations are religious organizations with defined systems of authority, and women have long been excluded from positions of power in these hierarchies, as in many other areas of social life. This is very clear in Christianity, though it is characteristic of the other major religions as well. Yet this situation has changed, in some cases quite considerably, and the Church of England (CoE) provides one good example.

Between 1987 and 1992, women were allowed to be deacons in the CoE but not permitted to be priests. Although officially part of the clergy, they were not allowed to conduct some basic rituals, such as pronouncing blessings or solemnizing marriages. In 1992, the Synod (governing assembly) voted to open the priesthood to women, and the first women priests were ordained in 1994. By 2016 some 28 per cent

of ordained ministers in the CoE were women, and the numbers look set to increase as more women than men are in training (Church of England Research and Statistics 2017: 4). In July 2005, the Church of England voted to begin the process that would allow women to become bishops, and, after years of deliberation and opposition, the first female bishop was ordained in January 2015. A survey in 2016 found that almost 15 per cent of archdeacons, deans and bishops (among the highest-ranking positions in the CoE) were female (ibid.: 11).

As more women take up roles in the higher positions within the church hierarchy, the percentage of women in training has risen quickly. Is this an example of the functionalist maxim that, as societies change, so must social institutions if they are to survive?

The Catholic Church has been more conservative in its attitude to women, and moves in favour of the ordination of women have been consistently rejected. In 1977 the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in Rome, declared formally that women were not admissible to the Catholic priesthood as Jesus did not call a woman to be one of his disciples. Pope John Paul II (1920–2005) reaffirmed this and both encouraged women to recall their roles as wives and mothers and supported policies prohibiting abortion and the use of

contraception (Vatican 2004). In 2020, it was reported that, when asked to say where evil was at work today, Pope Francis singled out 'gender theory', which has the 'dangerous aim' of erasing all distinctions between men and women, marking an attack on the 'creativity of God' (cited in Wooden 2020).

Controversy in the Anglican Church shifted to the issue of same-sex relationships and the priesthood. Gay men have long served in the Church, but with their sexuality suppressed, ignored or unobserved. The Catholic Church still holds to the position set out in 1961 that those 'affected by the perverse inclination' (towards homosexuality) must be barred from taking religious vows or being ordained. Other, Protestant denominations have introduced liberal policies, and openly gay clergy have been admitted to the priesthood in some smaller denominations.

The controversy over admission of gay men to the priesthood came to the fore in the UK in June 2003, when Dr Jeffrey John, an openly gay man living a celibate life, was appointed bishop of Reading. He eventually declined to take the post after his appointment caused a bitter row within the international Anglican Church. In August 2003 the rank and file of the Anglican Church in America (ACA) voted to elect an openly gay bishop, Reverend Canon Gene Robinson of New Hampshire. A conservative lobby group, Anglican Mainstream, was created to lobby against the appointment of gay clergy, and in 2009 the Anglican Church in North America was founded as counter to what some saw as the increasingly liberal teachings of the ACA.

In 2016, Nicholas Chamberlain, bishop of Grantham in the UK, became the first CoE bishop to reveal that he was in a same-sex relationship. The bishop gave a newspaper interview, having learned that a tabloid paper was about to go to print with the story. Starkey and Davie (2020) report that his diocese was concerned that reaction would be negative and, likely, highly critical. However, of 493 letters and emails sent to Dr Chamberlain, some 96 per cent were supportive, expressing respect for his honesty. Many were also critical of the church's 'hypocritical stance' in preaching love but failing to adapt to the ways in which people actually live and love in contemporary society. This case illustrates in microcosm something of the shifting attitudes, both within the Church and in the wider public, which increase pressure on churches to change.

As one letter-writer put it, 'please keep in mind most people are warm of heart and have no interest whatsoever in your sexuality.'

As the impetus towards more equality – a key feature of modernity – brings about increasing acceptance of same-sex relations and rights and gender equality, religious organizations have to respond. Some adapt and change to accommodate the emerging reality, while others stand in direct opposition to change and reaffirm their traditional position. What we can say is that organized religions cannot simply ignore the social changes taking place in the wider society of which they are a part.

See chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', for a wider discussion of sexuality and identities.

American exceptionalism?

In the developed world, the United States represents an important exception to the view that secularization continues apace. On the one hand, the USA is among the most thoroughly 'modernized' nations; on the other, it is characterized by some of the highest levels of religious belief and membership in the world. As 'Using your sociological imagination' 18.1 illustrates, this is very different from the case with many young people across Europe. How can we account for American exceptionalism?

The religiosity of Americans certainly is unusual in comparison with most developed countries. Indeed, Lipset (1991: 187) argued that, with few exceptions, 'the United States has been the most God-believing and religion-adhering, fundamentalist, and religiously traditional country in Christendom [where] more new religions have been born … than [in] any other country.' The evidence is clear that the USA is more religious than Europe, though there are some differences in national European

societies as well as between states and regions in the USA (Berger et al. 2008).

Some surveys show that around 40 per cent of Americans will have been to church in the previous week (Gallup 2019). A 2010 poll of 3,412 adults found that 86 per cent of Americans said they believed in God 'or a higher power', and taken together, these findings suggest a typical pattern of 'believing without belonging' (Grossman 2010). Around 40 per cent of adult Americans also believe the creationist account that God created humans sometime within the last 10,000 years, rather than Darwinian evolutionary theory (Gallup 2014).

Yet there is evidence that things may be changing. A 2010 survey of eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds – part of the Millennial generation – found this group were less likely to be committed to a faith than their parents, with 25 per cent unaffiliated to any church, declaring themselves to be atheists or to believe in 'nothing in particular'. They were also more liberal in their attitudes towards homosexuality, and Gallup (2014) found that around 30 per cent of eighteen- to 29-year-olds agreed with the scientific view of evolution compared to just 11 per cent of those aged fifty to sixty-four. Nevertheless, other evidence suggests that a majority, 67 per cent, of young adults in the Millennial generation (those born between 1981 and 1996) still believe in heaven, while 56 per cent believe in hell (Alper 2015).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

18.1 Losing My Religion?
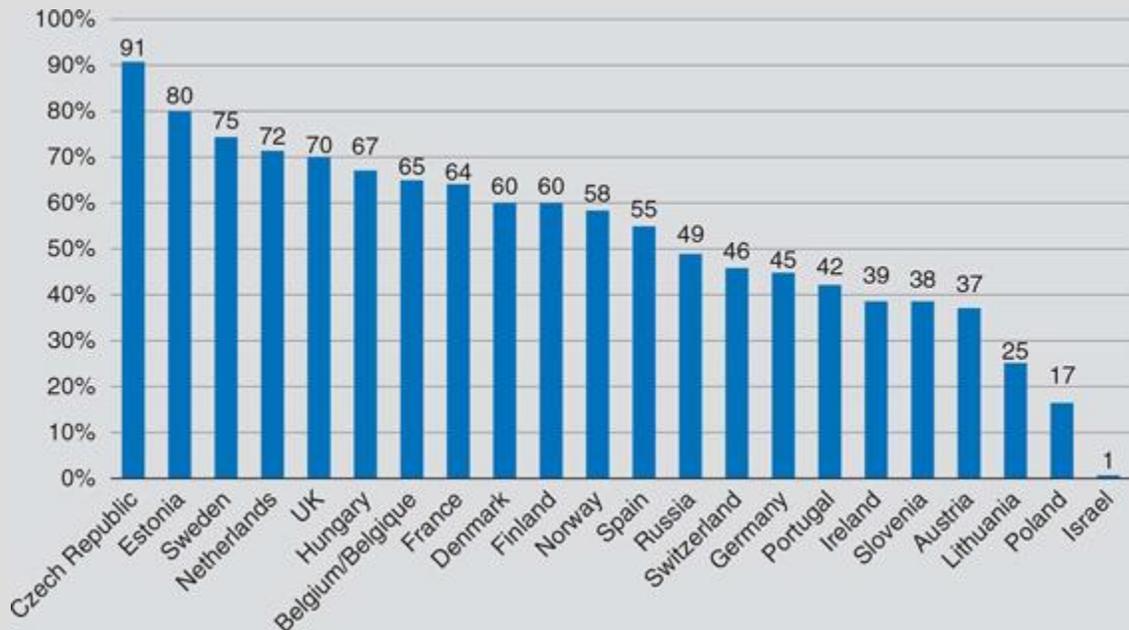
Figure 18.3 Proportion of sixteen- to 29-year-olds identifying with no religion in twenty-two European countries

Source: Bullivant (2018: 6).

Europe's young adults and religion

The ESS (European Social Survey) probes religious affiliation with a two-stage question. It asks respondents, first of all: 'Do you consider yourself as belonging to any particular religion or denomination?' For those who answer 'yes', there then follows a list of various options.

Figure 18.3, however, shows the proportion of young adults in each country who answered 'no' to that question (i.e., 'nones'). Admittedly, it may seem odd to begin a study on European youths' religiosity on this note. On the contrary, the high percentage of young adults affirming no religion in many countries, as may readily be seen above, is arguably the most significant fact here of all. The

data are arranged by highest to lowest. Excluding Israel (very much an outlier at the extreme low end of the scale), it is interesting to note that both the two highest (the Czech Republic and Estonia) and the two lowest (Lithuania and Poland) are post-communist countries.

Overall, in twelve out of our twenty-two countries, over half of young adults claim not to identify with any particular religion or denomination. In nineteen of them, over a third do.

Source: Bullivant (2018).

THINKING CRITICALLY

If larger numbers of young people do not identify with any religion, is this clear evidence of the progress of secular lifestyles in Europe? Based on the framing and wording of the research question(s), why might the conclusions from this survey not be quite as clear-cut as they seem?

Since the 1990s the composition of the Protestant Church in America has changed too. Membership of liberal or mainstream American churches, such as the Lutherans, Episcopalians (Anglicans), Methodists and Presbyterians, has been in decline. But there has been an increase in the membership of conservative, non-traditional Protestant churches, such as Pentecostalists and Southern Baptists (Roof and McKinney 1990; Jones et al. 2002). Conservative Protestants emphasize a literal interpretation of the Bible, morality in daily life and conversion through evangelizing.

Since the 1980s, the Protestant Church in the USA has seen a huge rise in evangelicalism, a belief in spiritual rebirth or being 'born again'. Evangelicalism can be seen, in part, as a response to growing secularism, religious diversity and, in general, the gradual decline of once core Protestant values in American life (Wuthnow 1988). Many Protestants are clearly seeking a more direct, personal and emotional religious experience.

Evangelical organizations are also highly effective in mobilizing resources to help achieve their objectives. Radio and television provided important new marketing technologies, enabling evangelists to reach a much wider audience. More recently, digital technologies have facilitated the creation of dedicated satellite TV channels, such as The Bible Network (TBN), websites, blogs and much more. In the business-like language used by religious economists, they have proved to be extremely competitive 'spiritual entrepreneurs' in the 'religious marketplace' (see 'Using your sociological imagination' 18.2).

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

18.2 Competing in the religious economy?

One quite recent and influential approach to the sociology of religion is tailored to Western societies, which offer many different faiths from which to choose. Taking their cue from economic theory, sociologists who favour this religious economy approach argue that religions can be fruitfully understood as organizations in competition with one another for followers (Stark and Bainbridge 1987; Finke and Stark 1988, 1992; Moore 1994).

Like economists who study businesses, these sociologists argue that competition is preferable to monopoly when it comes to ensuring religious vitality. This position is exactly opposite to that of the classical theorists. Marx, Durkheim and Weber assumed that religion weakens when it is challenged by different religious or secular viewpoints, whereas the religious economists argue that competition increases the overall level of religious involvement in society. Why should this be so? First, competition makes each religious group try that much harder to win followers. Second, the presence of numerous religions means that there is likely to be something for just about everyone. In culturally diverse societies, a single religion will probably appeal to a strictly limited range of followers, while the presence of Indian gurus and fundamentalist preachers, for example, in addition to more traditional churches, is likely to encourage a high level of religious participation.

This analysis is adapted from the business world, in which competition encourages the emergence of highly specialized products that appeal to very specific markets. In fact, the religious economists borrow the language of business in describing the conditions that lead to the success or failure of a particular religious organization. According to Finke and Stark (1992), a successful religious group must be well organized for competition, have eloquent preachers who are effective 'sales reps' in spreading the

word, offer beliefs and rituals that are packaged as an appealing product, and develop effective marketing techniques. Religion, on this view, is a business much like any other.

Thus religious economists do not see competition as undermining religious beliefs and contributing to secularization. Rather, they argue that modern religion is constantly renewing itself through active marketing and recruitment. Although there is a growing body of research which supports the notion that competition is good for religion (Stark and Bainbridge 1980, 1985; Finke and Stark 1992), not all have reached this conclusion (Land et al. 1991).

The religious economy approach overestimates the extent to which people rationally pick and choose among religions, as if they were shopping around for a new car or pair of shoes. For deeply committed believers it is not obvious that religion is a matter of rational choice. Even in the United States, where the religious economy approach originated, sociologists may overlook the spiritual aspects of religion. A study of baby boomers in the USA – the generation born in the two decades after the end of the Second World War – found that one-third had remained loyal to their childhood faith, while another third continued to profess their childhood beliefs although they no longer belonged to a religious organization. Thus only one-third were looking to make the kind of selection assumed by the religious economy approach (Roof 1993).

THINKING CRITICALLY

How might the religious economy approach help us to understand the process of secularization in the industrialized world? What does religious economy tell us, if anything, about the role of spirituality in human affairs?

Steve Bruce (1996) argues that the persistence of high levels of religion in the USA can be understood in terms of *cultural transition*. In cases where societies undergo rapid and profound demographic or economic change, religion can play a role in helping people adjust to their new situation. Industrialization came relatively late to the United States,

which then developed very quickly among a population composed of a great diversity of ethnic groups. Religion was thus important in stabilizing people's identities, allowing a smoother cultural transition into the emerging American 'melting pot'. However, there are some signs at least that younger generations may be beginning to dilute the longstanding American exceptionalism.

Fundamentalism

Perhaps the best evidence that we have not yet entered a secular age lies in the growth of religious fundamentalism. The term fundamentalism can be applied in many different contexts to describe strict adherence to a basic set of principles or beliefs. Religious fundamentalism describes approaches that call for the literal interpretation of basic scriptures or texts and the idea that the doctrines which emerge should then be applied to all aspects of social, economic and political life.

Religious fundamentalists believe that only one view of the world is true, so there is no room for ambiguity or multiple interpretations. Within religious fundamentalist movements, access to the exact meanings of scriptures is restricted to a set of privileged 'interpreters', usually religious leaders. This gives leaders a great amount of authority in both religious and secular matters. Fundamentalists have become powerful political figures in opposition movements, in mainstream political parties and even as heads of state.

Christian fundamentalism

The growth of Christian fundamentalist organizations, particularly in the United States, is a notable feature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Fundamentalists believe that the Bible is a guide to all spheres of social life, from family and business to politics and government (Capps 1995). Fundamentalist Christians believe in the divinity of Christ and the possibility of salvation for the soul through the acceptance of Christ as personal saviour. They are committed to spreading their message and converting those who have not yet adopted the same beliefs.

In the United States, some fundamentalist groups became increasingly involved in the 'New Christian Right' in national politics, particularly in the conservative wing of the Republican Party (Simpson 1985; Woodrum 1988; Kiecolt and Nelson 1991). Reverend Jerry Falwell identified five issues to be tackled: abortion, homosexuality, pornography, humanism, and the fractured family (Kepel 1994). Fundamentalist religious organizations are a powerful force in the USA and helped to shape Republican Party policies. Falwell initially blamed the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 on 'sinners' in the USA, saying on live television:

> I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU [American Civil Liberties Union], People for the American Way [both liberal organizations], all of them who have tried to secularize America. I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen'. (CNN 2001)

Although he later apologized, he caused controversy by stating that 'Mohammad was a terrorist. I read enough by both Muslims and non-Muslims [to decide] that he was a violent man, a man of war' (BBC 2002). Again, he apologized for the remark, but it was too late to stop sectarian rioting between Hindus and Muslims in Solapur, Western India, reacting against his claims. His comments led to widespread condemnation from Islamic leaders around the world. Another Christian fundamentalist, pastor Terry Jones from Florida, tried to organize an international 'burn a Koran' day in 2010 on the anniversary of 9/11, though this did not materialize after pressure from President Obama. However, in March 2011, Jones staged a mock trial and burning of his copy of the Koran in front of a small group at his own church in Gainesville.

Many of America's best-known and influential evangelists are based in the Southern and Midwestern states of Virginia, Oklahoma and North Carolina. Prominent preachers on the New Christian Right founded a number of universities in the USA aimed at producing a new generation 'counter-elite', schooled in fundamentalist Christianity and able to take up prominent positions in the media, academia, politics and the arts.

Liberty University (founded by Falwell), Oral Roberts University, Bob Jones University and others confer degrees in standard academic disciplines but teach within the framework of biblical infallibility. On campus, strict ethical standards are maintained in students' private lives (accommodation is single sex and students can be expelled for engaging in unmarried sex) and sexuality is channelled towards marriage.

Christian fundamentalism in the USA is a reaction against liberal theology and supporters of 'secular humanism' – those who 'favour the emancipation of reason, desires and instincts in opposition to faith and obedience to God's command' (Kepel 1994: 133). The movement sets itself against the perceived decline of the traditional family, the threat to individual morality, and the weakening relationship between humans and God. Yet, as we have seen, their opposition to formal gender equality and opposition to the acceptance of diverse sexual identities does not seem likely to win over a majority of young Americans, who may already be less religious than their parents and grandparents.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Religious fundamentalism seems to have increased during a period of rapid globalization. Why should this be so? What evidence is there that religious fundamentalism may become a permanent feature of modern societies?

Islamic fundamentalism

In the late nineteenth century, the inability of the Muslim world effectively to resist the spread of Western culture led to reform movements seeking to restore Islam to its original purity and strength. A key idea was that Islam should respond to the Western challenge by affirming the identity of its own beliefs and practices (Sutton and Vertigans 2005). This idea was developed in various ways in the twentieth century and formed a backdrop to the Islamic revolution in Iran. The revolution was fuelled initially by internal opposition to the shah of Iran, who had accepted and tried to promote forms of modernization modelled on the West – for example, land reform,

extending the vote to women, and developing secular education. The movement that overthrew the shah brought together people of diverse interests, by no means all of whom were attached to Islamic fundamentalism, but a dominant figure was Ayatollah Khomeini, who provided a radical reinterpretation of Shia ideas. In recent years, Islamic revivalism has spread, with a significant impact on other countries including Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Algeria, Afghanistan and Nigeria. What explains this large-scale renewal of Islam?

Islam, like Christianity, is a religion that has continually stimulated activism. The Koran – the Islamic holy scripture – contains many instructions to believers to 'struggle in the way of God'. This struggle is both within the individual and against unbelievers and those who introduce corruption into the Muslim community. Over the centuries there have been successive generations of Muslim reformers, and Islam has become as internally divided as Christianity.

Shia Islam diverged from *Sunni Islam* after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 CE. It has also been the official religion of Iran (earlier known as Persia) since the sixteenth century and was the source of the ideas behind the Iranian Revolution. Shia Islam traces its origins to Imam Ali, a seventh-century religious and political leader who is believed to have shown qualities of personal devotion to God and virtue outstanding among the worldly rulers of the time. Ali's descendants came to be seen as the rightful leaders of Islam, since, unlike the dynasties in power, they were held to belong to the Prophet Muhammad's family. Muhammad's heir would be a leader directly guided by God, governing in accordance with the Koran. There are large Shia populations in other Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, as well as in India and Pakistan. Islamic leadership in these countries, however, is in the hands of the majority, the Sunni.

The year 2019 marked the fortieth anniversary of the Islamic revolution in Iran, which overthrew the monarchist regime of the shah and installed an Islamic Republic under the Ayatollah Khomeini.

In the last thirty years, arguably the most important development has been the spread of [Salafism](#) – a revivalist Sunni reform movement that seeks to base Islamic practice on the example set by the first three generations of Muslim leaders after Muhammad's death (Wiktorowicz 2006). In particular, Salafism advocates that Muslims today should live and behave, as far as is possible, just like the 'pious forefathers' of that early, golden age of Islam in order to purify the religion. In this sense, Salafism is 'fundamentalist' (seeking a return to fundamental principles) but is not necessarily violent.

Meijer (2009: 2–6) argues that Salafism can be seen as Islam's 'new religious movement', though it is not unified and contains many strands and internal disagreements. Chief among these is the tension about what believers should do in societies that are not rooted in Sharia law. For some Salafists, the focus should be on persuasion, education and spreading the Islamic faith. For others, this is not enough, and believers must be prepared to criticize and seek peaceful reform. A third group of

activists advocate uprisings against leaders and regimes that do not adopt Sharia law.

The latter activist interpretation of Salafism has received much attention since it combined with Saudi Wahhabism and other ideologies, influencing movements that engage in violent actions. Wahhabism originated in the eighteenth century through the ideas of Muhammad ibn Abd-al-Wahhab, who focused on reforming Muslim societies, which he believed had moved away from true Sunni Islam and lost their way (DeLong-Bas 2004). Wahhabism considers all those who do not believe in the Oneness of God (strict monotheism) to be apostates or unbelievers, justifying a coercive and often violent *jihad* against them.

Though it is the extreme violence and terrorism of groups with global expansionary aims – such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State – that generate most publicity, we must remember that Salafism remains a multifaceted religious movement with numerous quietist and apolitical elements too. What unites all Salafists is the central belief that, if the religion is to prosper in the future, Muslims should be guided by the example of Islam's earliest exponents.

The spread of Islamic revivalism

Though Islamic fundamentalist movements have gained influence in many countries in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia, they have succeeded in coming to power in only three states: Iran, Sudan, which was ruled by the National Islamic Front from 1989, and Afghanistan, where the fundamentalist Taliban regime was ousted from power at the end of 2001 by Afghan opposition forces and the USA.

In many other countries, Islamic fundamentalist groups gained influence but did not take power. In Egypt, Turkey and Algeria, for example, fundamentalist uprisings were suppressed by the state and/or the military. The most recent group, the self-styled Islamic State (IS or *Daesh*), gained territory and several cities in Iraq and Syria and was well funded and armed. In 2014 IS declared a new caliphate, encouraging people from around the world to travel and join their campaign. A concerted air campaign by Russian-backed Syrian forces, along with US and European forces assisting diverse rebel groups on

the ground, regained a hold on all IS-controlled territory across Syria by early 2019, effectively ending the putative caliphate, at least for the near future.

The rise of IS and other global terror networks, such as al-Qaeda, may seem to support the 1990s notion that 'the Islamic world' may be heading for confrontation with those parts of the world that do not share its beliefs. The political scientist Samuel Huntington (1996) argued that, with the ending of the Cold War and increasing globalization, struggles between Western and Islamic cultures might become part of a worldwide 'clash of civilizations'. As the nation-state is no longer the main actor in international relations, rivalries and conflicts will tend to occur between larger cultures and civilizations. In particular, Huntington suggested, religion is the most important differentiating factor that divides civilizations. As an explanation for the causes of the 9/11 terror attacks and the US decision to remove the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, Huntington's thesis gained widespread attention.

However, critics point out that there are many political and cultural divisions *within* civilizations and that the forecast of conflict between civilizations is unlikely and alarmist. For example, in 1990, Saddam Hussein's Sunni regime in Iraq invaded Kuwait, which also has a majority Sunni population. Similarly, between 1980 and 1988, Iraq and Iran (both with majority Shia populations) were engaged in armed conflict with each other. The number of 'civilizational conflicts' in the past can also be exaggerated, as many apparently cultural conflicts were actually focused on access to resources and struggles for political power and military dominance (Russett et al. 2000; Chiozza 2002). In such conflicts, it has been, and still is, more common to see alliances forming *across* the boundaries of large-scale civilizations.

Although 98 per cent of the population of Turkey is Muslim, the country's independent constitution was founded on secular principles. Here, pro-secular Turks in the city of Izmir protest against the Islamist-based government of President Erdoğan.

Religious fundamentalism is a relatively new phenomenon that has arisen largely in response to the rapid globalization since the 1970s. As globalization brings modernizing forces that challenge traditional

elements of societies – such as strict gender roles and male dominance – fundamentalism in defence of tradition has emerged. Fundamentalism insists on faith-based answers and references to ritual truth, hence we might say that fundamentalists defend tradition in a traditional way, even when, like al-Qaeda or US evangelicals, they make use of the very latest modern technologies to do so.

Conclusion

One reason why religious fundamentalism is attractive to some people is that a 'back to basics' approach provides clear guidelines on how to live a good, moral life, something that political ideologies, secular humanism and more liberal religious teachings cannot match. Similarly, scientific thinking accepts that knowledge is always changing in the light of new findings and therefore provides no permanent rules for living. If Taylor (2007) is right in saying that a secular age is gradually emerging as traditional religions decline, the question of how people can or should live fulfilling lives will become more significant. Could a secular perspective really come to dominate such a quest?

Heelas (2015: 442) expresses serious doubts: 'Secularity is not exactly all-conquering. Atheism has not come to rule the roost.' He also notes that those who are indifferent to religion are unlikely to become the majority. In recent years some philosophers and social theorists have introduced the concept of the 'post-secular society' – a notion designed to capture rising public consciousness of religion and religion-related issues in the public life of most industrialized countries. Habermas (2008) argues that this rising consciousness is related to the linking of religion to global conflicts, the involvement of various religious 'voices' in debates on civil and political matters, and the political focus around increasing levels of migration. Taken together, these call into question the longstanding sociological forecast that secularity – over the long term – will probably become dominant. If this forecast is accepted as incorrect, then sociologists will have to rethink the role of religion in modern societies (Moberg et al. 2014).

Yet, so far, the thesis of post-secularism does not reflect the contemporary condition of social life, nor is there clear evidence of a new type of society. Instead, post-secular ideas occur in scholarly discussion about what the requirements are for the coexistence of religious and secular perspectives where each accepts the other on equal terms. What sociologists can bring to these essentially philosophical debates is an empirical focus that examines the contexts and practices of coexistence in the various spheres of social life.

Turning philosophical and theoretical speculation into empirical research studies has long been a crucial part of sociology's role. In this way, suggestions of a 'new accommodation' between religious and secular groups in a 'post-secular society' can then be realistically evaluated.

？ **Chapter review**

1. Durkheim argues that religious practices separate the sacred from the profane or mundane aspects of life. On Durkheim's definition, do Sunday Assemblies or football supporters constitute religions?

2. Provide some contemporary examples from around the world that demonstrate the continuing relevance of the ideas on religion of Marx, Durkheim and Weber.

3. List three central aspects of the secularization thesis. What counter-evidence is there in relation to each of these three? Taking into account the available evidence, are we entering a 'secular age'?

4. What is meant by 'fuzzy religion'? Does the evidence suggest that 'fuzzies' may become the majority in the developed countries?

5. Provide an account of the theories of 'neo-tribes' and 'everyday lived religion'. Do these examples challenge or support the secularization thesis?

6. Describe the main characteristics of churches, sects, cults and denominations. Why do some question the usefulness of these categories for researchers in the twenty-first century?

7. Write a 500-word summary of the major trends in religious observance in Europe over the last fifty years or so. Include reference to issues of religious diversity, gender, sexuality and the impact of migration.

8. What are new religious movements? Explain the differences in emphasis and practice of world-affirming movements, world-rejecting movements and world-accommodating movements.

9. Religious fundamentalism involves returning to the fundamentals of a religion's doctrine and practice. Why should we expect fundamentalism to remain on the fringes of religious organizations?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

Religion is seen as the realm of the sacred while mundane aspects of everyday life fall into the category of the secular. But, as societies become increasingly secularized, should we expect the space for sacred experiences to diminish? For some, it is possible to find secular events that still carry an experience of the sacred, albeit in different forms from those typically associated with religious institutions. The research paper below explores this issue, contrasting several social phenomena including leisure activities and religious occasions. Read the article and answer the questions that follow.

De Groot, K. (2017) 'Bingo! Holy Play in Experience-Oriented Society', *Social Compass*, 64(2): 194–205.

1. What kind of research methods are used in this study? List the main elements of the author's methodological approach.

2. Explain what is meant by 'liturgy' in the general sense adopted here. Also discuss the concept of 'play' and explain how these two concepts are connected in the paper.

3. In what respects can the game of bingo be said to be a form of 'holy play'? How does bingo compare with the author's other case studies?

4. How does the author characterize the wider society within which these activities take place and which sociological theories are used to flesh out this characterization?

5. Do you agree with the paper's conclusion that sacred events and secular events may be analysed using the same perspective? What, if anything, do we learn about the process of secularization from this study?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

As we have seen in the chapter, there is strong evidence that long-term processes of secularization seem to be leading towards a secular age, at least in the Global North and particularly in relation to Christianity and traditional Christian churches. Yet many sociologists are unconvinced by the 'self-sufficiency' argument that a secular age will see a strengthening of secular humanism as religious beliefs are eroded.

The 'insufficiency thesis' maintains that secularization has failed to lessen the strong and widespread longing for 'something more' than material life which can be found in New Age spiritualities, philosophies of alternative healing, explorations of inner life and a variety of other transgressive practices that take people 'out of themselves'. If we accept this position, then there may be consequences for the sociology of religion as a field of study. Paul Heelas (2015: 443) argues that 'In many a country, it is high time that the designator "sociology of religion" be relegated to history. It is high time to reactivate the perspective of the great masters, Durkheim, Simmel, Weber, Freud and James – currently Taylor.... what matters is *the comparative study of sources of significance for life.*'

Drawing on your own experience and material from this chapter, write a 1,000-word essay in defence of the standard sociology of religion. In your essay consider ways in which the classical studies and perspectives may be able to account for new religious movements and other transgressive activities. Be sure to compare and contrast traditional religions with more recent 'sources of significance'.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Science fiction mixes the latest scientific inventions and theories with some of the oldest religious ideals and themes. However, religious ideas and themes are usually embedded within the film rather than being overtly part of the plot. This has led some to suggest that science fiction doesn't 'do' religion because it jars with the scientific underpinning of this genre.

- *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), directed by J. J. Abrams
- *Prometheus* (2012), directed by Ridley Scott
- *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), directed by Stanley Kubrick

Watch one or more of the films above and suggest where the religious themes of belief, faith, ritual, salvation and the supernatural occur. On the basis of your observations, do these examples of science fiction 'do' religion as well as they 'do' science? Why might the religious elements of science fiction tend to be hidden rather than explicit? What does science fiction tell us about the status of religion in modern societies?

Further reading

A good place to start is with an introductory text such as Alan Aldridge's (2013) *Religion in the Contemporary World: A Sociological Introduction* (3rd edn, Cambridge: Polity), which is excellent. Inger Furseth and Pål Repstad's (2006) *An Introduction to the Sociology of Religion: Classical and Contemporary Perspectives* (Abingdon: Routledge) is exactly what it says it is. Grace Davie's (2013) *The Sociology of Religion: A Critical Agenda* (London: Sage) is also a very good assessment by a renowned expert.

Steve Bruce's (2013) *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) provides a forceful argument for ongoing secularization. An alternative is Peter Berger's (2003) *Questions of Faith: A Skeptical Affirmation of Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell), which is an interesting book by a sociologist with a religious faith.

Finally, two edited collections of essays by scholars of religion are Bryan S. Turner's (2016) *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion* (Chichester: Wiley) and Peter B. Clarke's (2011) *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Both are reliable and comprehensive books covering a wide range of subjects.

@ Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Sociology of Religion – **a peer-reviewed quarterly journal with many original articles in this field:**
https://academic.oup.com/socrel

The Religious Studies Project – an international project covering social scientific studies of religion – lots of podcasts, articles and interviews here:
www.religiousstudiesproject.com/

Sociology of Religion Resources – very useful resources based at the University of Aberdeen, UK:
www.sociologyofreligion.net/

Sociology of Religion Study Group of the British Sociological Association – helpful 'faith guides' and much more:
www.socrel.org.uk

Religion and Society Research Programme – British research programme with information on many projects looking at the relationship between society and religion:
www.religionandsociety.org.uk/

British Religion in Numbers – provides lots of quantitative data on the current state of religion in Britain:
www.brin.ac.uk

The Association of Religion Data Archives – American site aiming to 'democratize access to the best data on religion':
www.thearda.com/

The Immanent Frame – US site which publishes interdisciplinary essays on secularism and the public sphere:
https://tif.ssrc.org/

CHAPTER 19

THE MEDIA

CONTENTS

After the successful 'leave' campaign in the UK's EU referendum in 2016, some Brexit supporters saw BBC coverage as negative, 'pro-remain' and, often, fake news.

Since the businessman Donald Trump was elected US president in 2016, use of the phrase 'fake news' has mushroomed. In the eighth edition of this book in 2017, the phrase was entirely absent, but this time we have included it in the Glossary, such has been its rise to prominence. Trump used it to criticize not just specific news reports of his administration's policies but TV stations (especially US-based station CNN) and news outlets. Fake news has become a standard term of abuse that has quickly spread around the world and is heard in many political debates and news reports to imply that, intentionally or inadvertently, falsehoods are being presented as facts. Bakir and McStay (2018: 154) define fake news very broadly as information that is 'either wholly false or containing deliberately misleading elements incorporated within its content or context'. Two recent examples illustrate how quickly accusations of 'fake news' have permeated political discourse.

First, in 2019, reports emerged that a network of prison camps existed in China for the 're-education' or 'brainwashing' of some 1 million Muslims from the Uighur community, who were being held without trial or due process. The International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) released the information distilled from leaked Chinese documents. The Chinese government said that the camps are 'vocational, education and training centres' aimed at combating terrorism. China's ambassador to the UK called the ICIJ documents 'a pure fabrication' and told reporters, 'Don't listen to fake news' (BBC News 2019c).

Second, parts of Australia saw a large number of bushfires in 2019 that burned for many months and on into 2020. Climate scientists argue that the high-risk conditions in Australia were brought about by anthropogenic global warming, making the wide spread of bushfires at least 30 per cent more likely than without the current level of warming (World Weather Attribution 2020). Yet, in January 2020, a UK government foreign office minister said that, 'Very regrettably, it is widely reported on social media that 75 per cent of the fires were started by arsonists.' The claim was repeated in Parliament by a Conservative MP, who said that, 'In Australia, 75% of fires are caused by arson.' One Labour MP called the 75 per cent figure 'fake news', suggesting that it was being circulated as fact by climate deniers in Australia, and a group of scientists complained that government ministers should rely on expert evidence, not social media, which is 'awash with false claims' (BBC News 2020a).

In the first case, fake news is used by a government representative to dismiss the claims made in a conventional piece of investigative journalism. In the second, government ministers repeat, as fact, claims about the cause of bushfires circulating on social media, raising suspicions about the politicians' motives. It might appear that it is possible to establish objectively the veracity or otherwise of these claims, but this is not so easy in an age of social media and online disinformation, when '"proper" journalism is under attack from fake news farms, troll factories and social bots' (Farkas and Schou 2020: 2). Paradoxically, in the so-called Information Age, establishing the truth

has become ever more difficult among the welter of information providers, particularly online.

One way of discussing these issues is within the frame of the emergence of a [post-truth politics](). The latter is said to be characterized by the erosion of trust in experts, expertise and establishments of various kinds (medical, political, media) and the increase in popular alternatives whose status rests mainly on their *not* being part of the established order. Oxford Dictionaries made 'post-truth' their international word of the year for 2016, noting that its usage had increased dramatically since 2015. 2016 was the year of the UK's EU referendum and the election of Donald Trump as president of the USA, both events marked by claims about false or misleading statements and statistics, mistrust of information offered by establishment sources, and increasing numbers of people looking to social media rather than conventional sources for their news and information.

See [chapter 12](), 'Social Interaction and Daily Life', for a wider discussion of social media and its impact and uses.

Governments have begun to counter what they see as the damaging effects of fake news, and several have moved to legislate. In Malaysia, fake news producers potentially face jail; in Kenya, legislation was introduced to stop the production of fake news; and, in Singapore, ministers can order warnings to be placed alongside social media posts they consider to be false, and in some cases companies may be forced to remove them (Agence France-Presse 2019). In a post-truth world, such measures may have the opposite effect, of reinforcing suspicion of the established order, pushing people further in the direction of alternatives.

We return to these issues in the next section, which looks at current media diversity, starting with the digital revolution in communications, focusing on the internet and social media. We then provide a brief

account of selected mass media – television, music and newspapers – before considering some of the main theoretical approaches to the study of media and their role(s) in society. Media representations of social groups and the relationship between mass media and the audience follows. The chapter ends with a discussion of the concentrated ownership of global media as well as some emerging alternatives and resistance to these.

Media diversity

Communication – the transfer of information from one individual or group to another, whether in speech or through the media – is crucial to any society, and today a variety of mass media exist: radio, television, newspapers and magazines, film and the internet. These are referred to as 'mass' media because they potentially communicate with very large numbers of people. In our century, communications technology enables data and information to be shared instantaneously and simultaneously with many millions of people almost anywhere in the world.

The Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously argued that media forms (not just their content) have distinct effects in society. His dictum 'the medium *is* the message' suggests that society is influenced more by the *type* of media than the content or messages it carries. Everyday life is experienced differently in a society in which the internet and social media facilitate instantaneous communication from one side of the globe to the other, compared to one that relies on horses, ships and telegraph cables. McLuhan forecast that electronic media would bring about a global village in which a majority of people can witness live the major events unfolding. In that, he was surely correct. Twenty-four-hour news channels and online news report on stories in real time, films made in Hollywood, India and Hong Kong reach a worldwide audience, while YouTube stars, Instagram influencers and sports stars are global household names. The human world has become ever more integrated into a single 'community of fate'.

In the twenty-first century, forms of communication that were previously quite self-contained have become intertwined to a remarkable degree. This is often described as media convergence, the process through which apparently distinct media forms merge in new ways. Television, radio, newspapers and phones have undergone profound transformation as a result of the digital revolution. Fewer people buy hard copies of newspapers, but most titles are available online, and digital radio is accessible from any device with internet access. With voice recognition, fast broadband, web casting and cable

links, the internet may already have become the primary conduit for the delivery of information, entertainment, advertising and commerce.

For most of human history the main means of communication was speech, and face-to-face communication was the norm. In such oral cultures, information, ideas and knowledge are transmitted across generations by word of mouth, and the kind of repositories of useful knowledge we are used to – books, libraries and archives – just did not exist. Once speech could be written down and stored, initially on stone, the first writing cultures emerged, initially in China around 3,000 years ago. Religions have played a major part in the development of communication by finding ways of producing manuscripts and texts for study and transportation, literally to 'spread the word'.

An important precursor to the modern mass media was the invention, in the mid-fifteenth century, of the Gutenberg movable-type printing press, which enabled texts to be reproduced. Gutenberg made use of existing technologies – paper and woodblock printing – which originated in Asia much earlier. Although technological advances and new uses of older technologies played a crucial part in its development, mass forms of printed media could develop only in societies where access was relatively cheap and an educated population was able to take advantage. As we shall see throughout the chapter, technologies do not emerge in a vacuum. They are developed and either take off or die as a result of social, cultural, political and economic factors.

Specific technologies and devices are also not purely neutral but favour some applications over others. For instance, the digital revolution brings exciting new possibilities for interactivity, user participation and communication, such as networking on social media and remote conferencing via Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Yet such technologies also facilitate an intensification of monitoring and [surveillance](#) in many areas of life, from workplaces to private homes, which companies use to make profits and governments can adopt to monitor their populations. Bear this point in mind as you work through the rest of the chapter. We will start with the 'digital revolution', before examining ways in which digitization impacts on older media forms.

For more on the internet and mobile phones, see , 'Globalization and Social Change'.

The digital revolution

The digitization of information and data is widely seen as revolutionizing modern communications. The processing power of computers has increased continually along with internet speeds, making it possible to stream or download music, movies and live TV. Digitization also permits the development of interactive media such as blogs, vlogs and social media, in which people actively participate or structure what they see or hear (Negroponte 1995).

One fundamental aspect of media is the infrastructure through which information is communicated and exchanged. Some important technological advances over the second half of the twentieth century completely transformed the face of telecommunications – the communication of information, sounds or images at a distance. For example, information and communications technology (ICT) stands behind profound changes in global money systems and stock markets. Money is no longer just physical cheques or cash but has become electronic, 'stored' in computers in the world's banks. The value of whatever cash you do have is determined by the activities of traders on electronically linked money markets, a marriage between computers and satellite communications.

Four technological trends have led to such developments: first, the constant improvement in the *capabilities of computers*, together with declining costs; second, the *digitization of data*, making possible the integration of computer and telecommunications technologies; third, *satellite communications*; and, fourth, *fibre optics*, which allow many different messages to travel down a single cable. The dramatic communications explosion shows no sign of slowing down. Indeed,

since our sixth edition in 2008, there has been a rapid take-up of smartphones and tablets, made possible by the spread of wireless technology (Wi-Fi), which enables internet access almost anywhere. Smartphones have integrated the functions of computers into small, hand-held devices, and by 2007 smartphone sales overtook laptop PCs for the first time. In 2015, laptops and netbooks remained the device of choice for many online activities ([figure 19.1](#)). In 2019, an Ofcom survey found that 34 per cent of respondents went online only with devices other than a computer, a significant rise from just 6 per cent five years earlier; 11 per cent used only a smartphone to go online in 2019, whereas this figure had been 3 per cent in 2014 (Ofcom 2020: 8).

The remarkably rapid take-up of smartphones and tablets shows how far personal computing has come. The first computing era began with large mainframe machines taking up entire rooms. The second era saw the personal computer become a fixture in workplaces and homes. The current miniaturization of the computer takes us into the third era of 'ubiquitous computing' in which computers are mobile, a part of almost every social environment (Maier 2011: 143–4). Digital technology has become normalized quite quickly and social norms are evolving, both online and in the physical environments where they are used.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Conduct a participant observation of smart/mobile phone use over one week, noting how people behave with their phones while in public spaces. Are there any informal norms of acceptable use in public areas or simply no limitations at all?
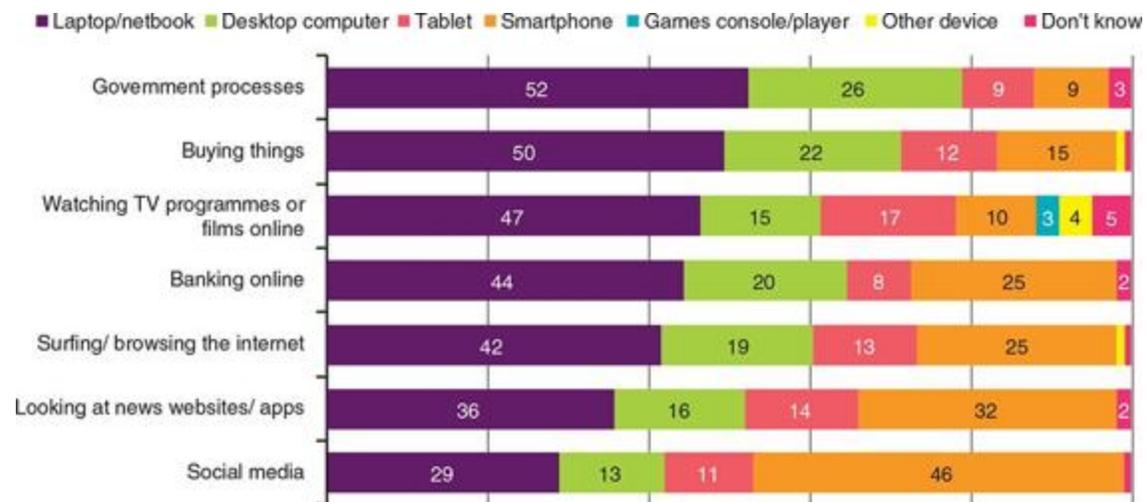
Figure 19.1 Device used most often for specific internet activities

Source: Ofcom (2015: 74).

The internet

In the early 1990s, the individual PC was becoming little more than a point of access to a global network of interconnected computers – the internet. Created during the Cold War period, the internet developed from a system used in the Pentagon, headquarters of the American military, from 1969. The system was named the ARPANET, after the Pentagon's Advanced Research Projects Agency. ARPA sought to enable scientists working on military projects in different parts of the USA to pool resources and share expensive equipment. Almost as an afterthought, its originators thought of a way to send messages, and electronic mail – 'email' – was born. Universities also began using the system, and by 1987 the internet had 28,000 host computers in universities and research labs. By 1994, businesses had overtaken universities as the main users of the network.

The potential of the internet for the growth of international political activism is explored in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Today the most common use of the internet is the worldwide web, a global multimedia library invented by a British software engineer, Tim Berners-Lee, at a Swiss physics lab in 1990. Users conventionally navigate the web with a 'web browser', but the increasing popularity of mobile 'apps' (software applications) – for use mainly with smartphones – removes the need for a browser altogether. Websites have grown in sophistication, integrating graphics and images, video and audio files, and the web is the main interface for 'e-commerce' – business transactions conducted online.

Table 19.1 **World internet penetration rates by geographic region, 30 June 2019**

Source: Internet World Stats (2019).

World regions	Population (2019 est.)	Population % of world	Internet users, 30 June 2019	Penetration rate (% pop.)	Growth 2000–19 %	Internet world %
Africa	1,320,038,716	17.1	522,809,480	39.6	11,481	11.5
Asia	4,241,972,790	55.0	2,300,469,859	54.2	1,913	50.7
Europe	829,173,007	10.7	727,559,682	87.7	592	16.0
Latin America/Caribbean	658,345,826	8.5	453,702,292	68.9	2,411	10.0
Middle East	258,356,867	3.3	175,502,589	67.9	5,243	3.9
North America	366,496,802	4.7	327,568,628	89.4	203	7.2
Oceania/Australia	41,839,201	0.5	28,636,278	68.4	276	0.6
WORLD TOTAL	7,716,223,209	100.0	4,536,248,808	58.8	1,157	100.0 %

Internet use is still growing globally, and, as table 19.1 shows, penetration rates are highest in North America and Europe, but the fastest growth rates since 2000 have been in Africa, the Middle East, Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia, as more internet-ready devices spread to these regions. The UK Office for National Statistics (ONS

2019h: 2) estimates that, in 2019, 91 per cent of adults were recent (in the last three months) internet users, including 99 per cent of those aged sixteen to forty-four. Around 87 per cent of adults in Great Britain reported using the internet every day (ONS 2019i: 2–4). Almost all British households with an internet connection (98 per cent) used fixed broadband, though many people also used mobile broadband at home (64 per cent) and 84 per cent accessed the internet away from home, most using a smartphone but a smaller number used a tablet, laptop or other handheld device.

Perhaps surprisingly, the most common internet activity in 2019 was still sending and receiving emails, followed (in order) by general browsing for information on products and services, banking, reading news or magazines, and making video/voice calls with Skype, Facetime or similar (ONS 2019i: 8). Some 7 per cent of adults said that they had been victims of credit or debit card fraud in the previous twelve months, and, again, the most common type of fraud (37 per cent) involved links within emails. What we may conclude from this survey is that most adults in the UK now use the internet, and they do so more often and for a wider range of activities than ever before, suggesting that the internet is now firmly embedded within most people's everyday routines. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many aspects of our lives became severely restricted at very short notice, but the continuation of the internet enabled many people to work from home, keep in touch with distant relatives and friends, buy food and other products, pay their bills and manage their finances, and, of course, keep themselves entertained. This is perhaps the best example that demonstrates just how far people's lives and routines have moved into online environments.

However, internet access and use is marked by inequalities, known today as digital divides (Andreasson 2015; Ragnedda and Muschert 2013). For example, the ONS (2019i: 2) reports that only 78 per cent of disabled adults and 47 per cent of the over-75s were recent internet users in 2019, and the over-75s accounted for 2.5 million of the 4 million adults who had never used the internet. Since 2000, the survey regularly shows that more men than women access the internet, but by 2019 the gender gap had closed significantly (92 per cent versus 90 per

cent). Only among the over-75s was there still a stark difference, with 54 per cent of men and just 41 per cent of women in this age group being recent internet users. Regional disparities also exist. Recent internet use was highest in London and the South East (93 per cent) and lowest in Northern Ireland (87 per cent), the North East (88 per cent) and the West Midlands (89 per cent).

Globally, internet access is difficult to gauge accurately, but in 2019 the best estimate was that the relevant number of people was just over 5.5 billion (Internet World Stats 2019). Access remains geographically uneven, reflecting global inequalities, though growth rates are highest in those regions with the lowest internet penetration rates (table 19.1). The advent of cloud computing, which delivers computing to end users as a service rather than as a product, removes the need to install similar software on every device and should enhance this process by reducing the costs associated with internet access. Applications, programs, file storage and operating systems are based in large datacentres, and individuals can access the services they need on whatever device they happen to be using. Many experts have suggested that 'cloud computing is revolutionary, even if the technology it is built on is evolutionary' (Sosinsky 2011: 3). The revolutionary aspect is that cloud computing makes potentially unlimited computing resources universally and continuously available in every part of the world without the need to load these onto every device.

However, there are also issues of privacy, confidentiality and data security: as more information travels across wireless connections and material is stored in datacentres, users cede control to cloud service providers. For instance, four men received jail terms in the USA in 2018 for their part in a 2014 data breach on Apple's iCloud, involving 240 user accounts. Thirty celebrities' accounts were hacked and some had their private and intimate images published online (Ashford 2018).

Evaluating the internet

Views on the overall impact of the internet fall into two broad categories. Some see the online world or cyberspace as fostering electronic relationships that enhance sociability and face-to-face interactions. For example, while travelling or working abroad, people

use the internet to communicate with friends and relatives back home, making distance and separation more tolerable. It facilitates the formation of new types of relationship, such as 'anonymous' individuals who meet via social networks, chatrooms and blog sites to discuss topics of mutual interest. Many internet users become part of lively online communities that are qualitatively different from those they inhabit in the physical world. Those who see the internet as a positive addition argue that it expands and enriches our social life.

Castells (2001) argues that the internet enables new combinations of work and self-employment, individual expression, collaboration and sociability. For political activists, it is possible for networks of individuals to combine and cooperate to spread their message rapidly around the world. This was evident in the so-called Arab Spring of 2010–12, Extinction Rebellion direct actions in 2019, and many more, as activists share ideas, concerns and experiences on globally accessible sites, blogs and social media, using these to organize protests. Mainstream news outlets also draw on reports from the scene of a rapidly changing situation, effectively turning members of the public into 'citizen-journalists' and participants in the production of news.

Others see a more dystopian future emerging. As people spend more time staring into their mobile devices and performing more routine tasks online, they spend less time interacting face-to-face, and as a result the physical infrastructure, such as banks and high street shops, shrinks. Some sociologists fear that the internet will increase social isolation as household members spend less 'quality time' with families and friends and the line between work and home becomes blurred. Many employees work at home after hours, checking email and finishing tasks online that they were unable to complete in normal hours. Personal relationships suffer, traditional forms of communal entertainment reduce, and the fabric of social life is weakened.

Online banking and shopping are often seen as the cause of struggling high streets. But is this an inevitable outcome in the digital era?

New media technologies often generate unease and uncertainty. Concerns about the internet reflect similar fears in the past about the impact on young people of film violence, electronic music and particularly television. In *The Lonely Crowd* (1961), David Riesman and his colleagues expressed concern about the impact of TV watching on family and community life. Yet, while some of their concerns were well founded, any rounded view would see that television has enriched social life in many ways too.

Many see the internet as exemplifying an emerging, networked, global society (Castells 2006). Interactions over the internet certainly can feel like being part of a different type of social world. For instance, in cyberspace, we cannot know with certainty the details of people's identities or where in the world they are. Kolker (2009: 253) argues that:

> In our relationship with traditional media, we are always aware that what we read, hear, and see has some kind of authorship behind it: someone writing and editing the newspaper column; producing, directing, and distributing a recording, a radio or TV show, or a movie. Advertising reminds us continuously that someone wants something from us … But at the keyboard and online, we seem to be in control and in intimate connection with something or someone, in a world both internal and external simultaneously.

Rheingold (2000) acknowledged the positive potential of cyberspace but also accepted that the darker side cannot be wished away. His interest is in virtual communities – 'social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on … public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace' (ibid.: 5), and he provides an extended description and analysis of a virtual community – a parenting conference – on the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link), a computer conferencing system. Rheingold says that being a part of the WELL is very much like being part of the real physical world, but in disembodied form:

People in virtual communities use words on screens to exchange pleasantries and argue, engage in intellectual discourse, conduct commerce, exchange knowledge, share emotional support, make plans, brainstorm, gossip, feud, fall in love, find friends and lose them, play games, flirt, create a little high art and a lot of idle talk. People in virtual communities do just about everything people do in real life, but we leave our bodies behind. You can't kiss anybody and nobody can punch you in the nose, but a lot can happen within those boundaries. (www.rheingold.com/vc/book/intro.html)

Global society 19.1 China and Russia: national states versus global media?

The Chinese government has long sought to restrict what Chinese people can see and hear in the mass media. For example, in the 1980s the state encouraged the purchase of televisions, as it saw broadcasting as a means of uniting the country and promoting party authority. Yet Lull's (1997) survey of 100 families found that people were 'masters of interpretation, reading between the lines in order to pick up the less obvious messages.' Seeing content that emphasized individuality and consumerism also led many viewers to conclude that other societies seemed to offer more individual freedom than their own.

More recently, the internet and new digital technologies posed fresh challenges for the Chinese state and people. Many external sites are blocked to Chinese internet users and a veritable army of institutional, paid and volunteer censors monitor blog posts, bulletin boards and web content. Such an authoritarian approach has been labelled the 'great firewall of China'. On occasion an even more radical approach has been taken. Following ethnic protest and riots, the Chinese authorities closed down the internet altogether for six months in the province of Xinjiang.

In Iran and Russia, there have also been attempts to increase state control over global internet access. Iran's state-run telecommunications company monitors all content across its National Information Network and restricts information from external sources. In 2019, the Russian president, Vladimir Putin, introduced a law forcing all smartphones, computers and smart televisions to be preloaded with Russian-developed apps, and around $32 million has been invested to create a specifically Russian version of Wikipedia (Newman 2020). In December 2019 it was widely reported that Russia had successfully tested RuNet, its own national internet infrastructure, which could survive if the system was disconnected from the global internet (Wakefield 2019). Some believe that this may be part of the eventual isolation

of Russia from the rest of the global internet, though there remain serious technical challenges if that really is the intention.

These developments follow on from earlier attempts to control the use of virtual private networks and to create content filters and website block lists. During political protests in Moscow in 2019, an internet blackout was imposed in another clear sign that the Russian state will not allow citizens unfettered internet access and is prepared to take legal and infrastructural measures to maintain state control. Perhaps we are witnessing the first serious cracks in the architecture of the internet as a global communications system? Some think that the very nature of digital media will enable people to circumvent strict state controls, but others maintain that state censors may well be able to keep pace with technological advances.

In 2006, Google announced that, in order to gain access to China's vast market, it would censor search results to satisfy the Chinese authorities. The BBC website was blocked, and critics warned that sensitive subjects, such as the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre and sites promoting independence for Taiwan, would be restricted. But in 2010, after a hacking attempt came to light, Google moved its China-compliant service to Hong Kong, and in 2014 another row broke out when Google refused recognition for the Chinese authorities' certificates of trust for websites. Nonetheless, Google's underlying cooperation with the Chinese on censorship suggests that profit-making rather than promoting American values remains the main driver for US media companies.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Is it correct to focus only on China, Iran and Russia for examples of internet censorship and control? What measures have Western states adopted, or are seeking to adopt, in order to exert some control over internet content and access for various social groups?

Virtual communities are not always positive, and organized crime can also take advantage of new online opportunities. The so-called dark

web – a hidden and encrypted part of the worldwide web where access requires authorization – can be used for distributing child pornography and hacked personal and financial data as well as many other criminal activities. The internet may also become dominated by business corporations which view virtual communities and social media purely as a new opportunity for branding and advertising as well as gathering and selling customer data. The internet further has the potential for intensified state surveillance and monitoring of the population – a 'nightmare vision' that owes something to Foucault's (1975) ideas on the eighteenth-century Panopticon. This was a prison design based on the principle of continuous monitoring of prisoners by guards, aimed at promoting self-discipline. If prisoners believe, but cannot know for sure, that guards may be watching them at any moment, then they must behave as the prison rules demand at all times.

> For a discussion of social media, personal identity and new forms of community, see chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life'.

So far, the rapid uptake of the internet, smartphones and social media suggest that, for a majority of users, the benefits of developing an online life outweigh the potential dangers. The rise of social media such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and Facebook, along with video-sharing sites such as YouTube, shows just how popular web-based communications are, though there is some early evidence that people in the higher socio-economic groups, with higher levels of education, are likely to be the most active participants (Kagan 2011). Nonetheless, if McLuhan was right that 'the medium is the message', then, as Castells maintains, today, 'the network is the message'.

Television

From the 1950s the number of TV sets in the developed countries and the amount of time that people spent watching television content

increased dramatically. Today, virtually every household possesses at least one TV set and, in the UK, most people watch some television every day. But since the start of the twenty-first century, television broadcasting technology has undergone a revolution with the transfer of programme transmissions from analogue to digital. Analogue TV is the 'old' system of broadcasting, used to transmit signals to television sets since the 1940s. It converts sound and pictures into waves, which are transmitted through the air and picked up by the aerial on the roof of a house or on top of the television.

Digital TV works by transforming pictures and sound into information that is potentially understood by a computer and can be delivered via satellite, cable or aerial. Digital television has largely replaced analogue in most developed countries, and the number of television channels available has increased radically. It is normal today to see digital service providers offering monthly subscription packages that give viewers the choice of 200+ TV, radio and data channels. Analogue TV in the UK provided just five. This increase extends more opportunities for content providers and, crucially, for advertisers, while pay-per-view and monthly subscription services are likely to increase the amount consumers spend.

The latest major shift is towards internetdistributed television, which allows video programme content to be viewed across a range of digital devices. Netflix, Hulu and Amazon Video now produce television programming that challenges mainstream providers. Gray and Lotz (2019) argue that the move online may signal not the death of television but, rather, another stage in its evolution. For example, so-called reality television shows, such as *Love Island* and the national *Idol* series, involve not just television but also chatrooms, websites and video streaming in the production of 'multiplatform, multi-media events' (Turner and Tay 2009: 7). These multi-media events draw huge global audiences, providing for a common public experience and for national and international conversations. Indeed, Hill (2015: 4) argues that, 'If we visualise the value of reality TV as a cultural phenomenon, we would see shows overshadowed by talk about them.' In this way, becoming just one element in a media mix may actually enable television to retain rather than lose its cultural relevance.

Television and social life

Although we seem to know what is meant by 'television', once sociologists try to pin it down and define it, the picture drifts out of focus. Is television the physical box in the living room? Obviously it is, but it is also a technology and mode of transmission, a form of media different from all others. Television can also be discussed in terms of its content – the programmes, news broadcasts and series transmitted. Stokes (2000: 1) suggests that television is 'a complex cultural technology; it is an entertainment medium; a scientific phenomenon; a multifaceted industry. Television is a feature of modern *public* life which has a place in every *private* home.' Television is all of these things, but it is also ingrained in the routines of daily life. We watch TV, talk about it with friends and family, and build TV viewing into the routines of our daily lives. For many, 'the box' is still something that we turn on even as we get on with other things, forming an essential backdrop to our lives. As Silverstone (1994: 3) explains:

> Television accompanies us as we wake up, as we breakfast, as we have our tea and as we drink in bars. It comforts us when we are alone. It helps us sleep. It gives us pleasure, it bores us and sometimes it challenges us. It provides us with opportunities to be both sociable and solitary. Although, of course, it was not always so and although we have had to learn how to incorporate the medium into our lives we now take television entirely for granted.

In 2019, 95 per cent of UK households had a TV set receiving broadcast programmes, and TV still accounts for a majority of video consumption, at over three hours' average viewing per day, most of it from public broadcasting (Ofcom 2019: 11–12). Indeed, Ofcom (ibid.) reports that the proportion of homes with only digital terrestrial TVs actually rose by 2.3 per cent between 2012 and 2019, making up almost 40 per cent of all households (see figure 19.2). Conversely, paid-for satellite TV has remained at around 30 per cent while digital cable is much lower, at just 13.6 per cent. Conventional television contributes to people's emotional and cognitive well-being and helps them design their routines and habits. As a result it creates a stronger sense of 'ontological security' – feelings of order and continuity in daily life –

which may help to explain its persistent popularity and ability to resist the alternatives.
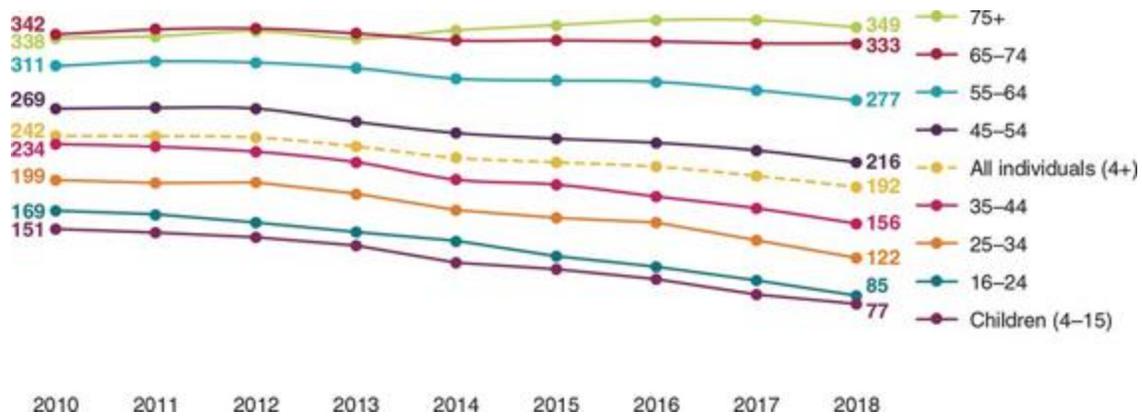
Figure 19.2 Average daily minutes broadcast television viewed per person, by age, 2010–18

Source: Ofcom (2019: 4).

However, this does not mean that the dominant position of TV is inevitable or unassailable. The technological dimension of television does not determine its social and cultural reception. As 'Using your sociological imagination' 19.1 shows, young people's everyday routines and habits today may well be significantly different from those of their parents, with significant consequences for the future of the television experience. Around 1.2 million UK households (4.1 per cent) claim they do not have a TV set but prefer to watch online TV or video content providers such as Netflix on other devices, and this number seems set to rise in the future.

Several media theorists have been highly critical about the seemingly ever-increasing diet of television. Neil Postman's (1931–2003) tellingly titled *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1986) argues that television fails to present or handle serious issues because 'the form excludes the content'. By this he means that television is a medium that is incapable of sustaining serious content. For Postman, rational argument is best carried in the form of the printed word, which can sustain complex and serious content. He harks back to the nineteenth century as an 'age of reason', when the written word was dominant. For Postman, the medium of print creates a rational population, whereas the medium of television creates an entertained one. News, education and politics are

all reduced to TV entertainment, so that, as the book title says, we are simply 'amusing ourselves to death'.

In a similar vein, Putnam (1995) argued that, in the USA, the significant decline in social capital – mutual obligations and trust – correlates well with the rise of the television. TV viewing, he maintained, is strongly and negatively related to trust and group membership. One reason for this is the effect of programme content on viewers. For example, heavy watchers of TV tend to be sceptical about the benevolence of others – by overestimating crime rates, for instance. Putnam concluded that the erosion of America's social capital was recognized only several decades after the process had begun.

Putnam's thesis on the decline of social capital is examined in more detail in [chapter 12](), 'Social Interaction and Daily Life'.

The digital revolution brought with it many innovations that seemed to threaten the dominance of television, including global video providers such as Netflix and Amazon Prime Video, live streaming online, and catch-up services via smartphones and other digital devices. So are we now witnessing the end of the TV era? That conclusion may be premature: 'we'd soon all bin the large square boxes around which we had organized our living rooms (despite having recently upgraded them to hi-def flat screens) and we'd reallocate the seven or so hours a day that we'd supposedly been spending with the box to texting, Tweeting, watching video online, and updating our Facebook status' (Gray and Lotz 2019: 2). The link between programme transmission and immediate reception, which was challenged with video cassette recorders and DVDs, has been decisively broken as streaming and catch-up services increase in popularity, enabling bingewatching of box sets at any time of our choosing. Yet, in the midst of such significant change, so far it seems that people still mainly watch traditional weekly-episode series and conventional types of programme, while

older television businesses continue. What does television offer that social media and online sites cannot match?

Television remains a key medium used by companies and advertising agencies, and this is likely to continue as long as it provides a large enough audience of potential consumers. But television is also viewed favourably as the source of reliable news and information, particularly when compared to social media. A recent survey of the huge US media marketplace found that consumers still spend more time with television than any other advertising-supported medium, while local TV news was trusted more than all other forms of news and information, including from online sources (Advanced Television 2020). A similar survey by the European Broadcasting Union (EBU 2020) reported that, across Europe, radio and tele vision remained the most trusted media for news and reliable information, while, in 85 per cent of European countries, social media were the least trusted.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

19.1 Can television survive the digital revolution?

Livingstone and Bovill's (1999) survey of children's media use in the UK – the first for forty years – found a developing 'bedroom culture', with two out of three working-class children and 54 per cent of middle-class children having a TV in their bedroom. By 2009, around 77 per cent of all five- to sixteen-year-olds had their own TV in the bedroom, 56 per cent of which were multi-channel sets. Such personal ownership by children is not restricted to TV, as 73 per cent also had their own mobile/smartphone, 69 per cent had a DVD player, MP3 player and games console, and 55 per cent had a laptop or PC (Livingstone 2009). By contrast, in other parts of Europe, children's TV ownership is much lower. The continuing popularity of TV still seems to be rooted in its ability to provide a broad range of 'gratifications': excitement, conquering boredom, relaxation and overcoming the threat of feeling 'left out'.

However, television watching habits are changing, particularly among younger people, as 'on-demand' services become popular, internet use increases, and video-sharing websites provide interactive ways of viewing. Many social media sites may also show that Putnam's thesis is too pessimistic. There is some evidence that young people favour interactive forms of media, and, if so, this is likely to mean changes in television production and output as well.

Television remains popular among young people, but trends in time spent watching broadcast programmes on a TV set is now clearly downwards among a younger generation of 'digital natives', who have grown up with digital technology as the norm. Ofcom (2019: 19) statistics show that the top five services watched by those aged eighteen to thirty-four in the UK in 2018–19 were, in first place, YouTube, then Netflix, ITV, BBC 1 and Amazon Prime Video, suggesting that conventional television may not maintain its dominant position for very much longer.

This difference between television/radio and social media was particularly stark during the Covid-19 pandemic. The EBU survey found that 47 per cent said they had used social media for news about the situation, but just 14 per cent ranked social media among their 'most trusted' sources. Globally, national government briefings were the most trusted sources of Covid-19 information, followed, again, by television news channels. Perhaps, against all the odds, television will survive the digital revolution, albeit as one of multiple sources of video content, news and information.

Music

Music is as old as human societies and its use pre-dates the development of complex language. The first music is assumed to have come from the human voice, and some of the oldest musical instruments have been found in parts of India and China. The earliest functional uses of music were in religious rituals and practices and, while the latter have tended to diminish in industrialized societies, music has continued to flourish.

Theodor Adorno (1976 [1950]) of the Frankfurt School of critical theory argued that musical forms tend to reflect the society within which they exist. In industrial capitalist societies, for example, music takes on predictable structures and offers easy gratification. People are socialized to expect uniformity and repetition, and musical forms require little effort on the part of the listener to be enjoyed. In his own time, Adorno saw jazz and other types of popular music as 'guilty' of this. However, music can also promote critical enlightenment and is, at least potentially, an active force in social life. Some forms of 'progressive' music (such as the experimental music of Schoenberg)

defy standard musical conventions and, in 'breaking the rules', challenge people's assumptions, forcing them to think more critically.

See [chapter 3](#), 'Theories and Perspectives', for discussion of the Frankfurt School.

Like Adorno, the music theorist Jacques Attali (1985) argues that music holds up a mirror to society, as its social organization and forms reflect society's mode of organization. In the industrialized societies, music is listened to primarily in recorded form on vinyl records, CDs and later, digital downloads. Music's hallmark here is repetitive mass production and the erosion of differences. Music can be background noise in supermarkets, railway stations, restaurants and many other public and private spaces. Echoing Max Weber's comments on music in the bureaucratic age, Attali argues that the endless repetition of recorded music reflects the industrial society that enabled it.

Attali's thesis goes one step further. He maintains that music not only *mirrors* social organization, it also carries a *prophecy* of the future. Music can do this because musicians rapidly explore and exhaust all the possibilities within a given code (the 'rules of the game', as it were) much more quickly than in other forms of cultural output. Music changes more quickly and is not tightly bound to material devices such as film projectors or TV sets. As musical organization is pushed to its internal limits, it is forced to break the bounds of the existing system in order to move forward. An example is the contemporary battle over music downloading and free sharing of copyrighted music. The commercial element of music-making is desperately struggling to keep pace with an emergent form that continually pushes and breaks the existing commercial 'rules of the game'.

What Attali saw emerging from industrialized music in the 1980s was a form of music-making based on the erosion of the boundaries between composer, performer and audience. Instead, people were starting to

make music for their own and their friends' pleasure, with little or no commercial motivation, though the latter may develop later. Music was becoming, once again, localized and made for smaller communities of people. Though his argument is never fully fleshed out, Attali suggests that the shift away from the old model of repetitive recorded music foreshadows the emergence of a post-industrial form of society. The paradox of his argument is that the movement towards the localization of music is occurring at a time when there is a more rapid globalization process.

In contrast to such large-scale social structural theories, the 1970s and 1980s saw the emergence of a new approach, known as the 'production of culture' perspective (Peterson 1976; Becker 1982). Here, music and other cultural products are viewed as social activities that have to be analysed in relation to the processes and contexts in which they are produced.

For example, Peterson and Berger (1975) studied pop music by looking at 'Number 1' hits in the USA between 1948 and 1973, comparing the number of performers and lyrics. They found that competition between large and small recording companies in the production of music was a key factor in explaining innovations. In periods of high market concentration (when just four companies produced almost 75 per cent of all hit singles), there was little innovation because there was no need to look for novelty or to introduce new products. However, as the large companies lost their monopoly on radio promotion of music and smaller companies were able to gain a foothold, innovation increased.

What Peterson and Berger were able to show through their careful analysis of how pop music is *actually produced* (the production of culture) is that innovation and increasing diversity *followed* changes in market concentration, they did not lead it. Thus, innovation was not down to the creative genius of particular musicians or the power of consumers to demand new types of music; it was much more to do with prevailing conditions within the music industry (see also Negus 1999).

Music is also an element in the construction of self-identities, something that is most readily seen in fan subcultures. It would be easy to dismiss the activities and adoration expressed by pop music fans of

The Beatles, Oasis, Lady Gaga and Dua Lipa as quite trivial and fleeting. Yet studies of 'fandom' show that the 'thousands of fan discussion groups, web sites, and mailing lists populating the Web are only eclipsed in presence by pornography (which, of course, has its own thriving fan base)' (Gray et al. 2007: 7). In these online forums and offline events, participatory fan subcultures develop which are intense sources of identification and belonging. Moving online has also demonstrated that fans cannot be dismissed as brainless, uneducated dupes and are perfectly capable of engaging in creative practices and intelligent discourse. As Duffett (2014: 4) argues, 'fandom seems to be at the forefront of an astute, techno-savvy consumer culture.'

Another example of research into music and the construction of identity is DeNora's *Music in Everyday Life* (2000), which adopts an interactionist approach, exploring the way individuals use music in the construction of the self and personal experience. The book is based on in-depth interviews with women in the USA and the UK and participant observation of 'music in action' in aerobics classes, karaoke evenings and music therapy sessions in retail settings. Music is not only something to be used; according to DeNora it can also influence people's actions. For instance, a routine car journey to the shops can easily become a secondary aim to listening to music on the car stereo. Hearing a particular opening chord or melody can reorientate people's actions, turning them away from their previous course.

Music can be literally the soundtrack to our lives and is an important element in the construction of identities.

DeNora argues that people behave rather like disc jockeys to their own selves, choosing music to create or change their mood and to alter the way they experience life. And though sociology has lagged behind other disciplines in the academic study of music, DeNora (2000: x) notes that music is 'a dynamic material, a medium for making, sustaining and changing social worlds and activities', though this cannot be understood in the abstract and has to be explored within the different contexts in which music is used. In this way, empirical studies could bring together the structural sociological theories of music and individual experience of it in order to enhance our understanding of its 'social powers'.

Globalization and the digitization of music

'The musical form is one that lends itself to globalization more effectively than any other', so say David Held and colleagues (1999: 351). This is because music is able to transcend the limitations of written and spoken language to reach and appeal to a mass audience. The global music industry, dominated by a small number of

multinational corporations, was built on the ability to find, produce, market and distribute the musical abilities of thousands of artists to audiences around the world. Over recent decades, an 'institutional complex' of companies has developed as part of the global marketing and distribution of music. Direct downloading over the internet is the present state-of-the-art practice exemplified by Deezer, Spotify, Apple Music and other streaming services.

The global industry in recorded music is one of the most concentrated. The three largest companies – Universal Music Group (31 per cent), Sony Music Group (21 per cent) and Warner Music Group (18 per cent) – account for around 70 per cent of global market share (Stassen 2019). The growth of the global music industry in the post-war period was primarily a result of the success of popular music – originating mainly in America and Britain – and the spread of youth cultures that identify with it (Held et al. 1999). The global music industry grew substantially over the 1990s, with sales in the Global South being particularly strong, prompting many top companies to sign up more local artists.

Stassen (2019) reports that a currently rising trend is in the Artists Direct segment of the market – that is, artists releasing music without a record label – which grew by 35 per cent in 2018. Artists Direct (3 per cent) and independent labels (27 per cent) accounted for 30 per cent of global market share in the same year. Streaming music also grew strongly and, for the first time, was the major source of revenue (51 per cent) for record labels. Processes of globalization have been one of the main forces in the diffusion of American and British music genres to international audiences.

The growing popularity of 'world music' – such as the phenomenal success of Latin-inspired sounds in the USA – shows that globalization may lead to cultural diffusion in more than one direction. For example, the rise to popularity of Korean pop music – 'K-pop' – is illustrated by the global success of BTS, the first South Korean group to have an album debut No. 1 on the US Billboard 100 Chart, in 2018 (Romano 2020). The group's 2020 world tour was expected to sell out quickly until the Covid-19 pandemic forced a postponement. The previous four-date stadium tour of Europe sold out in a matter of minutes. Although the music industry has become more concentrated, it has proved

particularly vulnerable to online file-sharing and illegal downloads. If internet distribution does not need a complex production and distribution network of shops, factories and warehouses, what will be left of the music business?

Wikström (2019) argues that the digital music revolution is characterized by three central features: connectivity, music as a service and amateur production. First, while the 'old' music industry was centred on corporate control of music to maximize revenue, the new digital business is about *connectivity* – the links between producers and audience. The internet has enabled everyone in the producer–audience network to upload music, not merely passively to receive it. This means the new industry is high in connectivity but low in producer control.

Second, the old industry was based on sales of physical products such as vinyl records, cassettes and CDs, but the digital industry shifts to the provision of *access to music services*. As soon as music is uploaded onto the web it becomes freely available, thus reducing its commercial value, but people *may* still be prepared to pay for the services that help them to find what they want in vast online archives. Third, music audiences today can become *amateur producers*, creatively remixing their favourite professionally recorded music and publishing online. If these amateur producers are also the ones who attend concerts and buy merchandise, then it is in the interests of music companies not to challenge them or their practices but to work with and encourage them (Wikström 2019: 8–9). What Wikström describes are some of the practical realities, conflicts and trade-offs as digitization transforms the music industry.

The corporate music industry is working to come to terms with the consequences of digitization. Global music sales have fallen and the sector has undergone large-scale redundancies and been forced to restructure (Gammons 2011: xix). Many in the music industry claim that swapping music files online is one of the major causes of lost revenue. Although attempts are being made to impose tighter controls on the replication of legally purchased music, the pace of technological change seems to run ahead of the industry's ability to curtail piracy.

"This next block of silence is for all you folks who download music for free, eliminating my incentive to create."

Early broadcasting of music on radio was also, at least initially, seen as piracy by the music industry. Record labels worried that if people could hear the latest releases on the radio they would not buy records and the business would be undermined. Eventually, rather than maintaining outright opposition, the labels incorporated radio use of copyright material into their business models with royalties paid by radio stations (Marshall 2015). In a similar process, the music industry today

offers *legal* download services such as Spotify. This downloading is legal because royalties are paid to record labels and artists. By the end of 2004, more than 125 million legal downloads of songs had been purchased and an official 'music download chart' had been established (BBC 2004). After the industry's initial rejection of online music, successful adaptation is crucial to the music business.

Newspapers

The development of newspapers (the press) during the nineteenth century occurred at a time of political and social unrest in Europe. The UK government, for example, exerted its control over the emerging newspaper industry through strict laws on libel and sedition, which prevented political agitation. At the same time, a stamp tax was imposed to ensure that newspapers could be afforded only by the well-off. But the stamp tax had unintended consequences, as illegal and inexpensive pamphlets were produced, such as William Cobbett's weekly *Political Register*, spreading radical views among the new industrial working class (Dyck 1992).

The stamp tax – condemned by its opponents as a 'tax on knowledge' – was finally repealed in 1855 after a series of reductions, leading many writers to hail a golden era of British journalism marked by a 'transition from official to popular control' (Koss 1973). An alternative view is put forward by Curran and Seaton (2003), who argue that the repeal of the stamp tax was an attempt to break the popularity of the radical press and boost sales of more 'respectable' newspapers funded by private owners and advertisers. The repeal of the stamp tax introduced not a new era of press freedom but a time of repression and ideological control, this time by market forces rather than government.

The newspaper was a fundamentally important development in the history of modern media, because it packaged many different types of information in a limited and easily reproducible format. Newspapers contained, in a single package, information on current affairs, entertainment and consumer goods. The cheap daily press was pioneered in the USA with the 'onecent daily' paper in New York, and the invention of cheap newsprint was key. By the early twentieth

century, ownership of much of the UK newspaper industry was concentrated in the hands of a few rich entrepreneurs. By the 1930s, Lords Beaverbrook, Camrose, Kemsley and Rothermere owned 50 per cent of British national and local daily papers and 30 per cent of the Sunday papers, and these 'press barons', as they became known, used their ownership to promote their own political causes and ambitions (Curran and Seaton 2003).

For more than fifty years newspapers were the main conduit for conveying information quickly to a national public, but their influence waned with the rise of radio, cinema and television and, increasingly, the internet. Figures for newspaper readership suggest that the proportion of people who read a national daily paper in the UK has been in terminal decline since the early 1980s. The proportion of men who read daily newspapers fell from 76 per cent in 1981 to 60 per cent in 1998–9 (ONS 2000). By 2016, just 30 per cent of men and 28 per cent of women used printed newspapers for their news and only 14 per cent of those aged sixteen to twenty-four did the same (Ofcom 2017b: 9). The enormous range of news and information available online has also pushed forward the move away from hard copy.

Newspapers, particularly the *tabloid* press (which targets a mass audience, in contrast to the so-called *broadsheets*), have become focused less on providing news and more on reporting, creating and sustaining a celebrity culture to combat falling circulation (Cashmore 2006). The role of newspapers and television in creating a climate in which celebrity culture can flourish alerts us to what some sociologists, following the 'production of culture' approach (discussed in the 'Music' section above), have called the 'celebrity industry' (Turner 2004). But what is a celebrity? In the early 1960s, Daniel Boorstin (1961: 58) noted that 'the celebrity is a person who is well known for their wellknownness.' Although many celebrities today are film stars or sportspeople, they may be known more for their media personalities and private lives than for their achievements. Others become celebrities just by regularly making it into magazines and newspapers or appearing on television, and you can probably think of many individual examples.

The celebrity culture in newspapers and on television requires an appreciative and demanding audience, and, as consumers, we all participate in the production of celebrity culture, though we often do it in quite 'knowing' ways (Gamson 1994). We know that many celebrities have no major achievements to offer and that their fame will probably be short-lived, but when we get bored with them we simply move on to the next one. In this way, celebrities have become commodities for our consumption via their media representations. Nonetheless, despite the apparent public addiction to celebrity, the continuing decline in newspaper sales indicates that celebrity news will probably not be enough to save conventional newspapers. Indeed, online communication might well bite further into newspaper circulation.

Despite online news and sports sites, physical newspapers remain popular. But have these commuters actually paid for theirs?

News information and celebrity gossip are available online via many sites almost instantaneously and are constantly updated during the course of a single day. Many newspapers themselves can also be accessed and read online free of charge. In the longer term it would seem that the age of print-only newspapers may be coming to an end as

the internet, worldwide web and digitization undermine their traditional business models. Newspapers are still experimenting with new business models, such as introducing subscriptions, online pay-per-view and, in the case of *The Guardian*, mixing print sales with online subscriptions and voluntary contributions from readers prepared to pay for 'independent, critical journalism'. Whether some or even any of these will prove to be sustainable has yet to be determined.

Theorizing the media

Four influential theoretical approaches to the study of the mass media will be introduced in this section: functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism and recent postmodern media theory. As we will see, they contain widely divergent views on the role and functions of the media within societies, and our fourfold categorization here is not an exhaustive one in the larger field of media studies.

Functionalism

In the mid-twentieth century, functionalist theorists focused on the ways in which the media help to integrate and bind societies together. Following the media theorist Denis McQuail (2000), we can identify several important social functions of the media that may work to stabilize the social system.

1. *Information* The media provide a continuous flow of information from webcams and radio reports alerting us to traffic jams, rolling weather reports, the stock market, and news stories about social and political issues.

2. *Correlation* The media help us to understand the meaning of the information they provide. In this way they provide support for established social norms and have an important role in the socialization of children, contributing a shared framework for the interpretation of events.

3. *Continuity* The media have a certain function in expressing the dominant culture, recognizing new social developments but also forging common values.

4. *Entertainment* The media provide amusement and a diversion from work, thus reducing social tensions. Entertainment acts as a release valve for society's problems and conflicts.

5. *Mobilization* The media can be used to persuade and encourage people to contribute to economic development, to uphold moral rules, and to mobilize the population in times of war and public

health crisis. This can be via direct public campaigns but is usually more subtle in the morality tales of soap operas and films.

Functionalist theories of the media – along with the functionalist approach in general – have fallen into decline. There are several reasons why sociologists have moved away from functionalism. First, it appears to do little more than describe the media's current roles rather than explaining why these exist. Second, functionalist accounts have had little to say about the audience reception of media products, tending to assume that people are relatively passive rather than active interpreters of media messages. Third, the functions above appear wholly positive, but some people see the media as a much less benign force. In particular, conflict approaches influenced by Marxism view the modern mass media as destructive of society's cultural vitality. Functionalist accounts do alert us to significant aspects of the media's role in social life, but they underplay the role of media bias and conflict, a criticism that could never be levelled at Marxist theories.

Functionalism was introduced in [chapter 1](#), 'What is Sociology?', and discussed in [chapter 3](#), 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Conflict theories

Particularly in European sociology, conflict approaches to the mass media have had more impact than functionalism. Here we look at two of the most important theories of the media from a broadly Marxist standpoint: the political economy approach, which concentrates on the ownership and control of media, and the 'culture industry' approach of the Frankfurt School of critical theory. The important research of the Glasgow University Media Group is also rooted in Marxist theory and is discussed below.

Political economy approaches

Political economy approaches view the media as an industry and examine the way in which the major means of communication have come to be owned by private interests. Media ownership has often been concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy magnates. In the pre-war era of mass newspaper readership, a handful of 'press barons' owned a majority of newspapers and were able to set the agenda for news and its interpretation. In our increasingly global age, the ownership of media crosses national borders, and media magnates now own transnational media corporations, giving them international recognition and influence.

Advocates of a political economy perspective argue that economic interests in media ownership work to exclude less powerful voices. Moreover, the voices that *do* survive are those least likely to criticize the prevailing distribution of wealth and power (Golding and Murdock 1997). This view was advanced by the American linguist and radical scholar Noam Chomsky (1991). Chomsky is highly critical of the dominance of large corporations over the American and global media and the tight control of information provided to the public. During the Cold War, for example, these corporations controlled information to create a climate of fear in the West about the Soviet Union. Since the collapse of the USSR, Chomsky maintains that corporately owned media have turned to exaggerate fears of global terrorism. This prevents the airing and proper discussion of other issues, such as the unaccountability of corporations or the lack of democracy. In short, Chomsky sees the mass media as disseminating propaganda in support of ruling groups.

Ideology and bias in the media

The study of the media is closely related to the concept of ideology and its effects. Ideology refers to the influence of ideas on people's beliefs and actions and, in its early formulations in the 1700s, was seen as a new science of ideas, a new branch of knowledge. This 'neutral' conception of ideology did not take hold, and in the hands of later authors 'ideology' was used in a much more critical way.

Karl Marx saw ideology as an important aspect in the reproduction of relations of class domination. Powerful groups are able to control the

dominant ideas circulating in society to justify and legitimize their own privileged position. Thus, according to Marx, religion is often ideological: it teaches the poor to be content with their lot and respect their social superiors. The task of social analysts is to uncover the distortions of ideology that will enable the powerless to gain a true perspective on their lives. Critical notions of ideology such as this 'convey a negative, critical or pejorative sense' and carry within them 'an implicit criticism or condemnation' (Thompson 1990: 53–4).

Thompson argues that the critical notion is preferable to the neutral version because it links ideology with power. Ideology is about the exercise of symbolic power – how ideas are used to hide, justify or legitimate the interests of dominant groups in the social order. In their numerous studies, the Glasgow University Media Group analyse the ideological aspects of TV news reporting and how it systematically generates bias. For example, news reports on industrial disputes tend to favour government and management rather than striking workers. Thompson claims that mass media – including all varieties of programme content and genre – greatly expand the scope of ideology in modern societies. They reach mass audiences and are, in his terms, based on 'quasi-interaction' – that is, audiences cannot answer back in a direct way.

In media and communication studies, a particular type of analysis – discourse analysis – has been widely adopted. Discourse analysts begin from the premise that language is a fundamental part of social life which is related to all other aspects (Fairclough 1992). Discourse analysis is used to examine texts of many kinds, though there are different versions of it (van Dijk 1997). For example, some studies engage in a detailed analysis of texts and documents, while others, drawing on Foucault's ideas, connect texts to theories of society, exploring the way in which discourses construct and shape social life itself. Fairclough argues that 'text analysis is an essential part of discourse analysis, but discourse analysis is not merely the linguistic analysis of texts' (2003: 3).

Texts can be newspaper articles and personal diaries, but they can also be transcripts of interviews, ethnographic conversations and focus groups, films, television programmes and web pages. *Discourses* are

'systems of thought' or ways of thinking about and discussing the world within a particular framework. Discourses erect boundaries around subjects, which limit what can sensibly be said about them. For example, the quite recently developed discourse on 'Islamic terrorism' sets the terms of debate for discussion of this phenomenon, ruling out alternative conceptions such as 'freedom fighters' or 'terrorists using Islam to justify their acts'. In *critical discourse analysis*, such discursive practices are linked to wider social structures of inequality and power relations, so that the ideological aspects can be identified and opened up for examination. According to Fairclough (1989: 15), 'language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power.' As we see in 'Classic studies' 19.1, the work of the Glasgow University Media Group shows what critical content analysis can add to our understanding of news reporting.

[Classic studies 19.1](#) 'Bad News' from the Glasgow University Media Group

The research problem

As we have seen, a substantial proportion of the population no longer reads hard copies of newspapers. But TV news remains the key source of information about the world for many people. Can it be trusted to give a true and accurate picture of events? Why would the news *not* provide accurate information and what are the consequences if it does not?

Some of the best-known critical studies concerned with television news have been carried out in the UK by the Glasgow University Media Group (GMG). The group has published a series of studies that are highly critical of the presentation of the news. Their early studies – *Bad News* (1976), *More Bad News* (1981), *Really Bad News* (1983) and *War and Peace News* (1985) – were very influential, setting out a research strategy for critical, thematic content analysis. Their strategy was essentially similar in each of these studies, though the focus of the investigations differed.

The Glasgow Group's explanation

Bad News (1976), the Glasgow Group's first and arguably most influential book, was based on an analysis of TV news broadcasts between January and June 1975 on the three UK terrestrial channels available at that time. The objective was to provide a systematic and dispassionate analysis of the content of the news and how it was presented. *Bad News* concentrated on the portrayal of industrial disputes, while the group's later work concentrated more on political coverage, including the 1982 Falklands War.

The conclusion was that reporting of industrial relations was typically presented in a selective and biased fashion. Terms such as 'trouble', 'radical' and 'pointless strike' suggested anti-union views. The effects of strikes, causing disruption for the public, were much more likely to be reported on than their underlying or immediate

causes. Film material used very often made the activities of protesters appear irrational and aggressive. For example, film of strikers stopping people entering a factory would focus on confrontations, even if these were infrequent.

Bad News also pointed out that those who construct the news act as 'gatekeepers' for what gets onto the agenda – in other words, what the public hears about at all (McCombs 2020). Strikes in which there were active confrontations between workers and management might be widely reported, while more consequential and long-lasting industrial disputes tended to be largely ignored. The views of news journalists, the authors suggested, tend to reflect their middle-class backgrounds and support the views of the dominant groups in society, who inevitably see strikers as dangerous and irresponsible.

In more recent years, members of the Glasgow Group have carried out a range of further studies. *Bad News from Israel* (Philo and Berry 2004) examined television news reporting of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The study was carried out over a two-year period, supported by several senior television news broadcasters and journalists who were involved in panel discussions with members of an 800-person sample audience. As well as looking at television coverage of the conflict, the authors were interested in how the coverage related to the understanding, beliefs and attitudes of the audience.

The research concluded that television news coverage of the conflict confused viewers and substantially featured Israeli government views. There was little devoted to the history or origins of the conflict to provide the relevant context, and there was bias towards official 'Israeli perspectives', particularly on BBC1, where Israelis were interviewed or reported more than twice as often as Palestinians. In addition, US politicians who supported Israel were often featured. The study found that the news gave a strong emphasis to Israeli casualties even though two to three times more Palestinians than Israelis were killed.

There were also differences in the language used by journalists, who would often describe Palestinian acts as 'terrorism', but when an Israeli group was reported as trying to bomb a Palestinian school they were referred to as 'extremists' or 'vigilantes' (Philo and Berry 2004). The message of this body of work by the GMG is that news reporting can never be thought of as neutral or 'objective'. Rather, it reflects the unequal societies within which it exists and, as such, should be seen as systematically biased.

Critical points

The work of the GMG is much discussed in media circles as well as in the academic community. Some news producers accused the researchers of exercising their own biases, which lay with workers and strikers rather than with government and management. They pointed out that, while *Bad News* contained a chapter entitled 'The trade unions and the media', there was no chapter on 'management and the media'. This should have been discussed, because news journalists are often accused by management of bias against them in disputes rather than against the strikers.

Academic critics made similar points. Harrison (1985) gained access to transcripts of ITN news broadcasts for the period covered by the original 1976 study, arguing that those five months were not typical. An abnormal number of days were lost because of industrial action over the period and, as it would have been impossible for the news to report all of these, the tendency to focus on the more dramatic episodes was understandable. In Harrison's view, the Glasgow Group was wrong to claim that news broadcasts concentrated too much on the effects of strikes. After all, many more people are affected by strikes than take part in them. Sometimes millions of people find their lives disrupted by the actions of just a handful of people. Finally, some of the assertions made by the group were simply false. For example, contrary to what the group maintained, news reports did normally name the unions involved in disputes and did identify whether strikes were official or unofficial.

Contemporary significance

The detailed and nuanced empirical research projects conducted by the GMG regularly demonstrate that a broadly neo-Marxist approach does not have to be purely theoretical. Their central argument – that 'the news' is a complex construction involving power relations, the production of bias and agenda setting – has become widely accepted. More recently, some members of the group set out an integrative approach based on the concept of 'circuits of communication' that links four elements – social and political institutions, media and its content, the public, and decision-makers – each of which can act independently or with any other element(s) (Philo et al. 2015). Working out how such circuits operate and change over time may inform some GMG studies in the future.

John Eldridge (1993), editor of one volume of the Glasgow Group's research, points out that what counts as objectivity in news reporting will always be difficult. Against those postmodernists who say that objectivity is irrelevant, Eldridge affirms the importance of viewing media products with a critical eye and that accuracy in news reporting can and must be studied. The work of the Glasgow Group forcefully reminds us that issues of truthfulness are always part of news reporting and is certainly worthy of sociological research.

The culture industry

The Frankfurt School was established during the 1920s and 1930s, consisting of a loose group of theorists inspired by Marx but who saw that his ideas needed quite radical revision. Among other things, they argued that Marx had not paid enough attention to the influence of culture in modern capitalist societies, where leisure time had effectively been industrialized. Members of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor Adorno (1903–69), were critical of the effects of mass media on the population and on culture.

Their extensive studies of the 'culture industry' – covering film, TV, popular music, radio, newspapers and magazines – have been very influential in the field of cultural studies (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002

[1947]). They claim that, in mass societies, the production of culture had become just as standardized and dominated by the desire for profit as in any other industry. In a mass society, the leisure industry is used to induce appropriate values among the public: leisure is no longer a break from work but a preparation for it. Members of the Frankfurt School maintained that the spread of the culture industry, with its undemanding and standardized products, undermined the capacity of individuals for critical and independent thought. Art disappears, swamped by commercialization – 'Mozart's greatest hits', for example, or student posters of the great works of art – and culture is replaced by simple and undemanding entertainment.

Conflict theories remain popular in media studies, though they are subject to some of the same criticisms as functionalist theories. There is a tendency to assume that people are unable to resist media propaganda and are easy prey for it. Like functionalists, the early critical theorists paid little or no attention to audience reception of media messages, focusing instead on the production of culture. The Frankfurt School's damning critique of mass culture has also been seen as linked to their defence of the high culture – classical music, opera, painting and the arts – favoured by social elites (Swingewood 1977). This is somewhat paradoxical, of course, given the Marxist origins of critical theory.

Bringing high culture to the masses or the destruction of culture?

By the 1970s, critical theory came to be closely associated with the work of Jürgen Habermas, often called the last of the Frankfurt theorists. The focus of Habermas's work shifted to an analysis of what he saw as the shrivelling of the public sphere of society and the consequent dangers for the future of reasoned democratic debate.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Why should a mass-produced poster of Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* or Van Gogh's *The Starry Night* be described as 'undemanding' when the original is not? Is there a positive side to the mass reproduction of art, music and film?

The fall of the public sphere?

Habermas is one of several theorists to assert that the public sphere in society is in trouble (see the discussion of Habermas's ideas in 'Classic studies' 19.2). In *The Fall of Public Man* (2003 [1977]) Richard Sennett also sought to explain the origins of the separation of public and private

spheres, arguing that these have become disconnected, both physically – with the separate development of residential housing estates, workplaces and leisure developments (including shopping arcades) – and philosophically, in the way we think about our distinct private lives.

For Sennett, the main problem developing in such changes is that, over time, the private sphere has tended to take over the public sphere. For instance, politicians are judged more on their personal characteristics, such as honesty and sincerity, than on their ability to perform public roles. The advent of modern visual media, especially television, has led to a highly developed presentation of self by politicians aimed at matching such expectations. Sennett sees this as destructive of an effective political life and representative of the fall of the dedicated public official.

However, there are some problems with the way the 'the public sphere' is presented and idealized in these accounts. The public sphere was actually constituted by excluding some social groups, notably women, ethnic minorities and non-property-owners. In this way, the very notion of a 'public' sphere allowed white, middle-class men to perceive themselves and their role and to present it to others as universal. Fraser (1992: 116) says that 'the bourgeois public was never *the* public.'

Feminist scholars argue that Habermas did not pay enough attention to the *gendered* nature of the public sphere. In separating the public from the domestic or private sphere of life, many issues that were important for women were simply excluded. This alerts us to another important point, namely that some 'publics' – such as women – were *intentionally* blocked from participating, demonstrating that conflictual social relations underpinned the idealized conception of a common public sphere. What critics suggest, therefore, is that the 'bourgeois concept' of the public sphere was a male-dominated one that helped to legitimize structured social inequalities.

Symbolic interactionism

Interactionist media studies can be traced to the 1930s, with Blumer's study of the impact of cinema on the audience being an early example. Blumer asked 1,500 American high school and college students to

record their experiences of watching films in 'autobiographies', which he presented in his book *Movies and Conduct* (1970 [1933]). Although pioneering in some ways, today the study is seen as overly simple, both in believing that the respondents' views could 'speak for themselves' and in its rather simple approach to cinematic 'texts'.

Classic studies 19.2 Jürgen Habermas – the rise and fall of the public sphere

The research problem

Modern democracies developed alongside the mass media, particularly newspapers and other types of publication. In a very real sense, the mass media enabled and encouraged democracy. Yet today the mass media are often seen negatively, as trivializing the democratic process and creating a climate of general hostility to politics. How did such a radical shift happen? Could it be reversed, or are the mass media inevitably failing democracies? The German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1929–), one of the last influential intellectuals of the Frankfurt School, took up these questions in a series of important works.

Habermas's explanation

Habermas (1981, 1985, 1989 [1962]) developed themes from the Frankfurt School in different directions, rooted in his abiding interest in language and the process of democracy. He analysed the emergence and development of the mass media from the early eighteenth century to the present, tracing the creation and subsequent decay of the 'public sphere'. For Habermas, the public sphere is an arena of public debate in which issues of general concern can be discussed and opinions formed, which is necessary for effective democratic participation and oils the wheels of the democratic process.

According to Habermas, the public sphere developed in the salons and coffee houses of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century London, Paris and other European cities. People would meet to discuss issues of the moment, with political debate being a matter of particular importance. Although only small numbers of the population were involved in the salon cultures, Habermas argues salons were vital to the early development of democracy because they introduced the idea of resolving political problems through

public discussion. The public sphere – at least in principle – involves individuals coming together as equals in a forum for public debate.

However, the promise offered by the early development of the public sphere has not been fully realized. Democratic debate is now stifled by the development of the culture industry. The spread of mass media and mass entertainment causes the public sphere to shrink and become a sham. Politics is stage-managed in both Parliament and the mass media, while commercial interests triumph over those of the public. 'Public opinion' is no longer formed through open, rational discussion but through manipulation and control – as, for example, in advertising. On the other hand, the spread of global media can put pressure on authoritarian governments to loosen their hold over state-controlled broadcasting outlets, and many 'closed' societies such as China are discovering that the media can become a powerful force in support of democracy.

As the global media become increasingly commercialized, they encroach on the public sphere. Commercialized media are beholden to the power of advertising revenue and compelled to favour content that guarantees high ratings and sales. As a result, entertainment will necessarily triumph over controversy and debate, weakening citizen participation in public affairs and shrivelling the public sphere. The media, which promised so much, have now become part of the problem with democracy. Yet Habermas remains optimistic. He argues that it is still possible to envisage a political community beyond individual nation-states in which issues can be openly debated and where public opinion will influence governments.

Critical points

Habermas's ideas have been subject to an important critique. The salon culture that he holds up as an arena of civilized, rational debate was strictly limited to the higher social classes and was beyond the reach of the working class. In short, it was an elitist pastime that bore little real resemblance to the needs of mass democratic participation. Habermas's view that the modern mass

media are destructive of the public sphere has also been seen as misguided. As we will see below, Thompson (1995) argues that the media actually enable *more* public debate by airing a variety of public matters and encouraging wider discussions. The internet, with its innumerable blogs, forums and chatrooms, is just the latest example of this.

Contemporary significance

Habermas's ideas provoked a good deal of debate and much controversy. Currently, it appears that they have lost some ground in the wake of critiques from those who defend the mass media as, on balance, a positive force in society. Postmodern thinkers also see Habermas as working within the older Frankfurt tradition, with its fear and mistrust of a 'mass' public, when studies today focus more on audience segmentation and diversity. There is some truth in such critiques. And yet Habermas's work remains a powerful reminder that the rational, modernist project that can be traced all the way back to the Enlightenment still has much to offer sociological or social theories of the media.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Are contemporary social media an online version of the kind of salon culture discussed by Habermas? How do social media differ in relation to which social groups participate and what subjects are discussed?

Perhaps the most influential interactionist approach to the media is moral panic theory, which emerged from the labelling perspectives of Charles Lemert and Howard Becker. Stan Cohen's (2003 [1972]) famous study of clashes between Mods and Rockers in the UK showed how exaggerated and sensational media representations contribute to recurring moral panics. These serve to scapegoat social groups, including immigrants and minority ethnic groups, moving attention away from structural problems such as unemployment and poverty.

Thompson (1990, 1995) analysed the relationship between the media and industrial societies from early forms of print through to electronic communications. He argues that the founders of sociology – Marx, Weber and Durkheim – paid little attention to the media's role in shaping modern societies. Though sympathetic to some of the ideas of Habermas, Thompson (1995: 42–3) sees that, too often, Habermas tends to treat people as passive recipients of media messages rather than as active agents:

> Media messages are commonly discussed by individuals in the course of reception and subsequent to it…. [They] are transformed through an ongoing process of telling and retelling, interpretation and reinterpretation, commentary, laughter and criticism…. By taking hold of messages and routinely incorporating them into our lives … we are constantly shaping and reshaping our skills and stocks of knowledge, testing our feelings and tastes, and expanding the horizons of our experience.

Thompson's theory of the media rests on a distinction between three types of interaction (see table 19.2). *Face-to-face* interaction, such as people talking at a party, is rich in the cues used by individuals to make sense of what others say. *Mediated interaction* involves the use of technology such as paper, electrical connections or electronic impulses. Mediated interaction is stretched out in time and space and goes way beyond the contexts of face-to-face interaction. It takes place between individuals in a direct way – say, two people talking on a phone – but there is no opportunity for non-verbal cues.

A third type is *mediated quasi-interaction*. This refers to the sort of social relations created by the mass media. Such interaction is stretched

across time and space but does not link individuals directly – hence the term 'quasi-interaction'. The two previous types are 'dialogical' – individuals communicate in a direct way – but mediated quasi-interaction is 'monological'. A TV programme, for example, is a one-way form of monological communication. People watching the programme may discuss it or shout at the set, but it does not answer back.

Table 19.2 Types of interaction

Source: Thompson (1995: 465).

Interactional characteristics	Face-to-face interaction	Mediated interaction	Mediated quasi-interaction
Space–time constitution reference system	Context of co-presence; shared spatial-temporal time and space	Separation of contexts; extended availability in time and space	Separation of contexts; extended availability in time and space
Range of symbolic cues	Multiplicity of symbolic cues	Narrowing of the range of symbolic cues	Narrowing of the range of symbolic cues
Action orientation	Oriented towards specific others	Oriented towards specific others	Oriented towards an indefinite range of potential recipients
Dialogical/monological	Dialogical	Dialogical	Monological

Thompson's point is that all three types of interaction intermingle in our lives today and that the media change the balance between the public and the private spheres. Unlike Sennett and Habermas, Thompson argues that this shift really brings *more* into the public domain than before, not less, and often leads to more debate and controversy. Postmodern theorists see things rather differently: some consider that mediated quasi-interaction dominates the other two types, with dramatic and negative consequences for social life.

Postmodern theory

Since the publication of Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), sociology has had to contend with a set of ideas about science, knowledge and culture that are at odds with the progressive, modernist ideals that led to the rise of the social sciences (see chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'). Lyotard argued that the great metanarratives of modernity – scientific truth, human progress and historical development – are in decline. Yet for postmodern thinkers the demise of metanarratives is a positive development. It means we now

live in a period when people are forced to face their modernity head-on and with no illusions: 'We live in a time of 'self-conscious modernity' or 'postmodernity' (Bauman 1992, 1997).

The postmodern world is marked by a lack of certainty, the mixing and matching of styles and genres, and a playfulness in relation to cultural products. In pop music, there is sampling, mixing of original tracks with new rhythms and rap, mash-ups – songs created by blending two or more recorded songs – and many more hybrid forms. In film, David Lynch's seminal *Blue Velvet* (1986) merged time periods and historical eras seamlessly, with vehicles from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s driving the same 1980s streets. And, in art, postmodern trends reject the idea of a progressive 'avant-garde', instead mixing high and popular forms in playful 'post-progressive' ways. Lyotard saw such playfulness as marking the end of distinct genres. As Western culture has run into the sand, all that is left to do, he says, is 'play with the pieces'.

Baudrillard and hyperreality

One of the most influential media theorists is the French scholar Jean Baudrillard (1929–2007), whose work was strongly influenced by the ideas of McLuhan. Baudrillard regarded the impact of modern mass media as being quite different from, and much more profound than, that of any previous forms. The mass media, particularly electronic media such as television, have transformed the very nature of our lives. TV does not just 'represent' the world to us; it increasingly defines and creates that world.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

19.2 New public sphere or trash TV?

Larger numbers of 'ordinary' people appear on TV today, some on political and moral audience discussion shows, such as the BBC's *Question Time* and *The Big Questions*, or on 'tabloid talk shows', such as *Maury* in the USA, which cover provocative and emotional issues, often in sensationalist language. So-called reality television, including *Big Brother, Love Island* and many more, also allows participants to give their opinions, on each other, on matters of morality and, occasionally, on politics.

Many millions of people watch at home and discuss the shows at work, in coffee shops, pubs and other gathering places. In the case of the global phenomenon of *Big Brother*, audiences interact with the show, voting for evictions of participants and commenting in online forums and spin-off shows. But are such programmes really providing new public spaces for engagement in a vibrant public sphere, or is this, as Frankfurt scholars forecast, just cheap, trashy TV to placate the masses?

In an early empirical study of audience discussion shows, Livingstone and Lunt (1993) used a multi-method approach involving focus group discussions, individual interviews, textual analysis of the programmes, and a survey questionnaire to gather the views of studio audiences and home viewers. They concluded that these programmes do deal with current issues as they affect people's everyday experiences, but they are not 'documentaries' and tend to construct viewers as community members. Hence, such programmes do not easily fit into any existing TV genre (Gregori Signes 2000).

As types of participation depend largely on the conventions of the genre involved, they are particularly open and undefined. Some involve laypeople and experts sitting together while the host moves around with a microphone. Here, experts can be questioned and

challenged and thus made accountable. In this sense, they are public spaces for the exercise of democracy, which is reinforced through the systematic prioritization of the lay rather than the expert perspective (Livingstone and Lunt 1993).

However, this positive conclusion has been questioned, as the study did not explore the 'interactional dynamics' of the actual discussions (Hutchby 2005). This is an important criticism because the issue of *who* speaks and when is a fundamental part of shaping conversations in particular directions. Audience discussions follow a formulaic progression, usually dominated and steered by the host, which means that the programmes may not be such open, public forums as they appear to be in audience and participants' accounts of them (Tolson 2005). Deery (2015: 29) argues that most 'reality shows' trade in a 'staged actuality' – part spontaneous, part manufactured – rather than simply presenting slices of 'real life'. The manufacture of discussion and debate in these productions reminds us, as Postman argued, that television is primarily (though not exclusively) an *entertainment* medium, to which all of its other potentially useful functions are subordinated.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> It has been argued that we can learn much about contemporary relationships and social mores from reality shows such as *Love Island*. Conduct an online search for articles that take this view and assess their arguments in light of the material in this box.

A simple way into Baudrillard's difficult postmodern ideas is as follows. There was a time, and not so long ago, when it was possible to separate reality, or the real world of events, from media representations of that world. So, for instance, in the real world there may be a war with real and terrible consequences for the combatants and civilians caught up in it. The media report on this war and inform us of what is happening. These two aspects – the reality and the representations – were seen as quite separate things.

But, according to Baudrillard (1983), the border between reality and its representations has collapsed and we can no longer separate representations from reality. There are, of course, still wars and there are still reporters sending back images and reports about them. Baudrillard argues that media representations are, in fact, *part of* the war in our hyperreal world and cannot be seen as separate from it. As the vast majority of people only ever 'know' about foreign wars, celebrities, politicians, and much more via media representations of them, their reality is shaped, determined even, by media representations. [Hyperreality](#) is a world in which the ultimate guarantor of authenticity and reality is precisely that we have seen it on TV or other media, which makes it 'more real than the real'. This may be part of an explanation for the growth of celebrity culture, where the only acceptable sign of significance is to appear on TV or in newspapers or magazines.

Just before the outbreak of hostilities in the first Gulf War in 1991, Baudrillard wrote a newspaper article entitled, 'The Gulf War Will Not Take Place'. When war was declared and a bloody conflict took place, it might seem obvious that Baudrillard was wrong. Not a bit of it. Even after the war, Baudrillard (2004 [1991]) wrote *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. What could he possibly mean? His argument is that this war was not like others across history. It was a war of the media age, a televisual spectacle, in which, along with millions of viewers throughout the world, US President George Bush Senior and the president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein, watched the coverage on CNN to see what was actually 'happening'.

Do embedded photojournalists who are present at significant happenings, such as wars or major protests, report on or help to create hyperreal events? Can they do both?

Baudrillard argues that, in a media-saturated age, a new reality – hyperreality – is created, composed of the intermingling of people's behaviour and media representations. The world of hyperreality is constructed of simulacra – images which get their meaning only from other images and hence have no grounding in an 'external reality'. For example, a long-running series of advertisements for the insurance comparison website Comparethemarket.com barely refers to insurance at all. Instead it alludes to previous adverts in the series, building characters and storylines about an anthropomorphized family of meerkats. Similarly, no political leader today can hope to win an election if they do not appear constantly on television, and the TV version of the leader is the one most viewers know – a hyperreal person who is 'more real than the real'.

Baudrillard's theory is seductive in an age of the global mass media and certainly has to be taken seriously. However, it can be objected that, once again, it treats the mass of people as passive recipients of media

messages rather than as active participants able to engage with and even resist them. Many social movement organizations, such as Greenpeace, do try to compete with the mass media to create an alternative (hyper)reality which will motivate the uncommitted to environmental activism. It is also the case that many real-world conflicts, famines and events fail to attract sufficient Western media interest and therefore fall outside hyperreality. In short, there is still a real world beyond the hyperreality of postmodern theory.

Many of the theories discussed above fail to appreciate the active part played by audiences in the reception of media content and forms. Because they look to theorize 'the media', there has been a tendency to downplay or ignore the diverse ways in which audiences make sense of and use different media products. However, scholars working in the field of audience research have changed this situation somewhat, and we look at some key ideas from this body of work in the next section.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Provide three recent examples of 'hyperreality'. Explain exactly what makes each one 'hyperreal'. Why should it matter if we can understand the world only through the lens of the global mass media?

Audiences and representations

The effect that media representations may have on the audience cannot be inferred from media theories but requires a range of empirical studies. The next section provides a brief summary of some of this research alongside a sketch of the chronological development of audience studies.

The active audience

One of the earliest and simplest models of audience response is that of the *hypodermic model*. This compares the media message to a drug injected by hypodermic syringe. The model is based on the assumption that the audience passively and directly accepts media messages and does not critically engage with them. It also assumes that the message is received and interpreted in more or less the same way as intended and by all members of society. On this view, the media is seen as 'drugging' the audience, destroying its ability to think critically about the wider world (Marcuse 1964).

The hypodermic model is now seen as too deterministic and in early studies was often little more than an unstated conjecture. However, its assumptions can still be found in news reports and some contemporary theories. For example, it is often argued that violent video games lead directly to violent actions or that easy access to online pornography leads directly to sexual offences. Critics of the model point out that it takes no account of the very different responses that audiences have to media content. There is also general agreement that audience responses pass through various stages. In the 1950s, Katz and Lazarsfeld (1955) drew on studies of political broadcasts during US presidential elections, arguing that audience response is formed through a two-step flow: the first step is when the message reaches the audience; the second comes when the audience interprets the message through their social interaction with influential people – 'opinion leaders' – who further shape the response.

More recent theories started to acknowledge the active role of the audience. The *gratification model* looks at ways in which different audiences actually use the media to meet their own needs (Lull 1990). People may use the media to learn more about the world, find out about the weather or check stock market movements. Others may get help with their relationships or feel part of a fictional community by watching continuing drama series, or use these to socialize with friends and colleagues who watch the same programmes. Exploring gratifications was an advance on the hypodermic model, though the 'needs' of the audience are thought already to exist, while critics suggest that the media may, in fact, create new 'needs'.

Reception theories, such as that advanced by Hall (1980), focus on the way in which the class and cultural background of audience members affects the way in which they make sense of different media 'texts' – a term that encompasses various media, from books to films and music. Some individuals may simply accept the 'preferred reading' that is encoded within a text – such as a news bulletin – by its producer. The preferred reading is likely to reflect the dominant or mainstream perspective. However, Hall argues that the understanding of a text also depends on cultural and class background. Some audience members may take an 'oppositional' reading of a text because their social position places them in conflict with the mainstream. For example, a worker involved in strike action or members of minority ethnic groups are likely to make an oppositional reading of a news story on industrial or race relations rather than passively accepting the dominant one.

Audiences also tend to filter information through their own life experience and may link different media 'texts' (programmes or genres, for example) or use one type of media to engage with another – questioning what they are told on television compared to newspapers (Fiske 1989). This *interpretative model* suggests that the audience response shapes the media through engagement or rejection of its output. Here the audience is more powerful, far removed from the early hypodermic model and almost a reversal of its main tenets.

In the twenty-first century, media theorists and researchers have drawn attention to the emergence of participatory cultures, particularly among young people who have grown up with digital technologies and

social media. A participatory culture can be defined as one 'with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices … also one in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another' (Jenkins et al. 2016: 4). Participatory cultures tend to break down the barriers between active cultural producers and passive media audiences/consumers. Instead, there are new opportunities for people to be both producers and audience/consumers (prosumers) within communities of interest stretched across the world.

chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life', contains a discussion of the role of social media in everyday life.

Participatory cultures involve their members actively in a variety of ways, and the internet, digital media and mobile devices have made involvement much easier than in the past. Jenkins (2009: xi–xii) argues that these forms of participation include *affiliations* (membership of online communities, gaming sites and message boards), *expressions* (including the creative production and sharing of music, video, images, mash-up and digital sampling), *collaborative problem-solving* (mentoring and teamworking to develop knowledge or complete tasks, as found on Wikipedia or in alternative reality gaming) and *circulations* (shaping the flow of media via podcasting or blogging). On this characterization, many readers may recognize their own activities as part of participatory cultures.

Empirical research and attempts to theorize the impact of participatory cultures on individuals, groups, communities and societies raise interesting questions. How vulnerable are such cultures to commercialization and systematic data-gathering by corporate and

state interests? Will the 'lowering of barriers' to artistic creation enhance our lives and improve understanding or lead to the 'dumbing down' of modern cultures?

What we can see in this brief sketch of audience research is the steady movement away from a simplistic understanding of the relationship between media output and the audience towards increasingly more sophisticated models that place greater emphasis on the participation of an active audience. We can also see a shift away from one-way models (from media to audience) in favour of two-way models that allow room for audiences to shape media output rather than simply being passive sponges soaking up whatever messages they are fed. Indeed, theories of an emergent participatory culture are about as far removed from the early hypodermic model of audience reception as it is possible to imagine and clearly owe much to the communicative possibilities opened up by the internet and digital technology.

Representing social divisions

An issue that has received much attention in media studies is the problem of media representations, particularly in film and television fiction. Which social groups should the mass media represent and which groups are absent from our screens? We look briefly at the way in which representations of social class, gender, ethnicity and disability serve to reinforce stereotypes, noting more recent evidence suggesting this may now be changing, at least in some cases.

Kendall (2005) notes that representations of the working class on UK television appear to be ubiquitous. From continuing TV dramas (soap operas) such as the long-running *Coronation Street* (1960 to the present) and *EastEnders* (1985 to the present) to films and comedy/drama series exploring working-class life, such as *Billy Elliot* (2000) and *Happy Valley* (2014–), working-class communities and characters play a major part. Some think that continuing drama series provide a means of escape from the mundanity of life, but this is not particularly convincing as many feature characters whose lives are just as routine and unexciting. A more plausible explanation is that soap operas explore the dilemmas we all may face and help viewers to think

creatively about their own lives. Rather than providing an escape, in fact, soaps must connect with the audience's experience if they are to be successful over a long period (Hobson 2002).

Nonetheless, it may still be objected that the majority of these representations reflect a middle-class view of what working-class life is really like. This is mainly because the production process is dominated by middle-class professionals and consequently represents their interpretation and understanding. In the UK, the working class tend to be shown in northern industrial cities; people work in manual jobs (or are unemployed) and are seldom shown making livings in other ways. The environments in which they live are usually relatively hard and unforgiving, but, paradoxically, they also inhabit communities with a strong social solidarity. This stereotypical presentation has been remarkably enduring and persists well into the twenty-first century. So, although working-class life clearly is represented, it is the accuracy or otherwise of the portrayals that is at issue.

Research studies have repeatedly demonstrated that representations of girls and women in the mass media overwhelmingly involve traditional gender role stereotypes. In the 1960s and 1970s, women were routinely presented in domestic roles as housewives and homemakers, as objects of male sexual desire, or in working situations that extend the domestic role, such as nurses, carers or office workers. Generally, such representations were consistent across news reports, drama and entertainment programming, leading Tuchman (1978) to refer to 'the symbolic annihilation of women' on television.

More recent research concludes that things are changing, albeit slowly, with an increasing variety, including that of the strong, independent woman (Glascock 2001; Meyers 1999). New female heroines in programmes such as *Killing Eve* (2018–), alongside strong female characters in professional roles in TV drama, all attest to changing representations of women. Yet many of these characters still conform to longstanding feminine norms. Buffy and Lara Croft are young, slim and conventionally attractive, appealing to the mainstream 'male gaze'. And many of the older, successful, professional women have disastrous or empty personal lives, illustrating Faludi's (1991) argument of a subtle

backlash (both in reality and fiction) against women who break conventional gender roles – it will all end in tears eventually.

Lauzen (2018: 2–3) reports that, in 2018, 68 per cent of programmes on US prime time TV still had a mainly male cast; females made up 40 per cent of all speaking characters and 58 per cent of male characters played professional roles compared to just 42 per cent of females. Female characters were much more likely to be identified by domestic and personal roles such as wife and mother. This survey shows no significant change in gender representation since 2012. Significantly, it also found that women made up just 27 per cent of all writers, directors, creators, producers, executive producers, editors and directors of photography, and this proportion has fallen since 2017 and barely changed since 2012. This bears out the argument that fundamental change in gender representation within cultural products first requires a more equal gender balance within the production process itself. It seems that there is quite a way to go before that happens.

See chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', for a detailed discussion of gender issues.

Media representations of minority ethnic groups and disabled people have been seen as tending to reinforce rather than challenge stereo types. Black and Asian people were noticeably absent from mainstream tele vision until quite recently; even when they were present – for example, in news reports and documentaries – they tended to be represented as problematic social groups. For example, media coverage of the 1970s moral panic around 'mugging' by black youths (Hall et al. 1978) and the inner-city 'race' riots of the 1980s and early twenty-first century was extensive and focused on youth crime and deviance rather than on economic disadvantage, high unemployment levels and racism within the police force.

The British film *Blue Story* opened in cinemas in 2019. The film tells the story of London's violent, so-called postcode gang wars through two young black teenagers, who begin as friends, but soon find themselves on different sides. At the first public screening in Birmingham, a fight broke out among teenagers in the foyer of the cinema complex, and police made five arrests and seized two machetes. The Vue and Showcase cinema chains cancelled screenings of the film on safety grounds.

The film's creator, Rapman (Andrew Onwubolu) (cited in Griffin 2020), criticized Vue's reaction, saying that 'the ban to me was really just prejudice ... If it was any other movie, if it was a James Bond movie, the film never would have got pulled. It was a film with a low budget filmmaker who they thought they could probably just wipe under the rug.' The police did not establish any link between the film and the brawl and did not ask for it to be banned, while four of the five teenagers arrested were too young to get into the 15-rated film (Campbell 2019). The film's treatment was contrasted with that of *The Dark Knight Rises*, a Batman film from 2012. During a screening in the USA in 2012, twelve people were shot and killed, but the film itself was not seen as responsible and no screenings were cancelled (Baggs 2019). The reaction to *Blue Story* by the two UK cinema chains was widely seen as racist, influenced by the same longstanding, institutionalized white stereotypes of black youth as an inherently problematic group that Stuart Hall found during the 1970s mugging panic.

Jack Shaheen (1984, 2001) examined the portrayal of Arabs on US television and Hollywood film. The 1984 study looked at more than 100 television shows featuring Arab characters between 1975 and 1984. According to Shaheen, such TV depictions depend on four myths: '[Arabs] are all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; they revel in acts of terrorism' (1984: 179). They are usually dressed strangely, reinforcing the view that Arabs do not look or act like Americans. Such portrayals were just as easy to find in children's cartoons and educational programmes, though more recent documentaries provided more accurate accounts.

In the overwhelming majority of Hollywood film characterizations, Arab characters were the 'bad guys'. Out of around 1,000 films, just twelve involved positive depictions, fiftytwo were quite balanced, and the other 900+ portrayed Arabs in negative ways. This was the case irrespective of whether the film was a blockbuster or low-budget feature and whether the character was central to the plot or played a minor part. Shaheen shows that such stereotypes have existed in film since 1896 and generally depict Arab people as 'brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural "others" bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners, especially Christians and Jews.' He argues that such stereotypes are useful for writers and filmmakers as they make their jobs that much easier and suggests that this situation will only change when the Arab-American community is powerful enough to influence the film industry.

The under-representation of black and minority ethnic groups in film was highlighted in 2015, when #OscarsSoWhite began trending around the world. This was in response to all twenty acting nominations at the US Academy Awards (the 'Oscars') being allocated to white actors, a situation that was repeated in 2016 (Ugwu 2020). The campaign raised awareness of the problem, but the evidence since is that changing the situation will not happen quickly. The 2020 British Academy of Film and Television Arts (Bafta) did not have any BAME actors nominated for an award, and, at the Oscars the same year, Cynthia Erivo was the only non-white actor to receive a nomination (*The Guardian* 2020b). April Reign, who created the 2015 hashtag, notes that the US Academy membership in 2020 was still 84 per cent white and 64 per cent male (Reign 2020). Shaheen's argument seems pertinent here, that real change will most likely require significantly more ethnic diversity throughout the film production process.

In the UK, ethnic minority cultures have also been commonly presented as different from an indigenous, white British culture and, often, as presenting problems for it (Solomos and Back 1996). Recent attempts to produce more representative characters and storylines, such as in *EastEnders*, may offer a way forward. The serial drama provides a format which allows a variety of ethnic groups to be shown as ordinary members of society with similar lives and the same personal troubles

as everyone else. It may be through such mundane representations that stereotypes can be broken down in the future.

If minority ethnic groups have been defined as *culturally* different, then the representations of disabled people have routinely been presented as *physically* or *bodily* different, based on the 'personal tragedy' model of disability (Oliver 1990; also see [chapter 10](#)). News stories involving disabled people are more likely to be aired if they can be fitted into this dominant framing, which typically means showing disabled people as victims and dependent rather than as living independent lives.

Disabled people have long been all but invisible in TV drama and entertainment and, when included, are over-represented among criminals and mentally unstable characters – 'the bad, mad and sad'. This situation has a very long history. Think of the evil Captain Hook in *Peter Pan*, the tragic Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* or John Merrick in *The Elephant Man*. Disabled characters are never incidental to a storyline but are included precisely because of their disability. In a content analysis of six weeks of UK television, Cumberbatch and Negrine (1992) found just 0.5 per cent of fictional characters were disabled people and almost all of these were wheelchair users – an inaccurate representation of disabled people in the UK, the overwhelming majority of whom do not use a wheelchair.

The 1990s saw more positive representations, particularly in American drama series, which tried to present disabled people as living 'normal' lives and played down impairments. However, Barnes (1991: 19) sees that simply ignoring impairments is not the answer. Instead, he maintains:

> The only solution with any hope of success is for all media organisations to provide the kind of information and imagery which, firstly, acknowledges and explores the complexity of the experience of disability and a disabled identity and, secondly, facilitates the meaningful integration of all disabled people into the mainstream economic and social life of the community.

Media representations are not the direct *cause* of discrimination and exclusion. Nevertheless, stereotypical representations can *reinforce* existing negative ideas of social groups and are therefore part of the

wider social problem. Despite some signs of growing awareness and some evidence of positive change in recent years, there is some way to go before media representations make a significant contribution to challenging rather than reinforcing damaging social stereotypes.

Ownership, power and alternative media

Sociological studies of the media show us that media forms and content are not politically neutral or even socially beneficial, but the increasing concentration of multi-media ownership in very large conglomerates known as 'supercompanies' poses a different set of issues. If politicians were alarmed at the ownership of a single national newspaper by one of the big press barons, how much more serious is ownership of transnational media companies? As we have seen, the internet is one of the main contributors to and manifestations of processes of globalization, yet this process is also transforming the reach and impact of other forms of media.

Although the media have always had an international dimension – including news gathering and film distribution – until the 1970s most media companies operated within domestic markets in accordance with national regulations. The media industry was also differentiated into distinct sectors that operated relatively independently. But profound transformations have now taken place. National markets have given way to a fluid global market, while new technologies have led to the fusion of media forms that were once distinct. By the start of the twenty-first century, the global media market was dominated by a group of about twenty multinational corporations whose role in the production, distribution and marketing of news and entertainment could be felt in almost every country in the world.

In their work on globalization, Held and his colleagues (1999) pointed to five major shifts that have brought about the global media order.

1. *Increasing concentration of ownership* The global media is now dominated by a small number of powerful, centralized media conglomerates.

2. *A shift from public to private ownership* Traditionally, media and telecommunications companies were partially or fully owned by the state. But liberalization of the business environment and relaxation of regulations led to the privatization and commercialization of media companies.

3. *Transnational corporate structures* Media companies no longer operate strictly within national boundaries and, likewise, media ownership rules have been loosened to allow cross-border investment and acquisitions.

4. *Diversification over a variety of media products* The media industry has diversified, and enormous media conglomerates produce and distribute a mix of media content, including music, news, print media and television programming.

5. *A growing number of corporate media mergers* There has been a distinctive trend towards alliances between companies in different segments of the media industry. Telecommunications firms, computer hardware and software manufacturers, and media 'content' producers are increasingly involved in corporate mergers.

If traditional media forms ensured that communication occurred within the boundaries of nation-states in a 'vertical' fashion, globalization is leading to the 'horizontal' integration of communications that is more readily extended beyond the confines of nation-states (Sreberny-Mohammadi et al. 1997). Yet this has developed unevenly, reflecting divisions between the Global North and Global South. Some scholars suggest that the new order would be better described as 'media imperialism'.

Media imperialism?

The dominant position of the industrialized countries (above all the United States) in the production and diffusion of mass media has led many observers to speak of media imperialism (Herman and McChesney 2003). According to this view, a cultural empire has been established in the postcolonial period which leaves less wealthy countries especially vulnerable, as they lack the resources to defend their cultural independence. Others argue that specifically American media domination is not as simple as the above sketch suggests.

What exactly is media imperialism? Boyd-Barrett and Mirrlees (2020: 1–2) argue that the concept originates in the 1960s and 1970s and was used to characterize the media power and influence of the USA, which

promoted American culture around the world – in particular, in relation to influencing the media institutions, organizations and cultures of the Global South. Although much of this activity involves private corporations, media imperialism also stretches to the actions of states and NGOs, all of which suggests that media organizations and products of some countries act as 'vehicles for economic and cultural influence in other countries' (ibid.).

The concept has since been applied beyond the USA to other former empires which have powerful, expansive media industries, such as the UK, Russia and France, and to rising 'little empires', including Brazil, India, South Korea and China. The latter tend to exert influence within specific geographical areas rather than being able to spread their influence globally. They also tend to be shaped to some degree by the more powerful US media industries. One way of assessing the extent of media imperialism is to look at where the major corporations are located.

The headquarters of the world's twenty largest media conglomerates are situated in the industrialized nations, the majority in the United States. The largest global media conglomerates or 'empires', such as AT&T, Walt Disney and Comcast Corp, are all US-based. In 2019, AT&T had a market valuation of $283 billion, Disney of $245 billion and Comcast of $211 billion. Over recent decades the main media supercompanies have made numerous acquisitions, such as AT&T's purchase of Time Warner and Comcast's purchase of UK-based Sky, both in 2018, for $85 and $39 billion respectively (Lee and Kang 2018; Seth 2019). Clearly, their enormous resources and diverse media interests give these companies the power to shape the global media landscape.

Western cultural products have become widely diffused around the globe, and American films and Western pop music are ubiquitous. For instance, in 2005 a new Disney theme park opened in Hong Kong with largely American attractions rather than reflecting local cultures. The 'themed lands' in Hong Kong included Main Street (USA), Adventureland, Fantasyland and Tomorrowland, with all the usual characters, such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Buzz Lightyear. Even when China is included within the rubric of 'developing countries',

then the latter still accounted for less than 10 per cent of all exported cultural products in the early twenty-first century (Sulehria 2018). It is not only the more popular entertainment forms that are at issue. Control of the world's news by the major Western agencies has also led to the dominance of a 'First World outlook' in news stories and reporting. Attention shifts to the Global South mainly in times of disaster, crisis or military confrontation, which reinforces the negative discourse on prospects for development and change.

Are smartphones spreading Western culture around the world? Do their benefits outweigh the dangers of potentially extending media imperialism?

Nonetheless, there are also counter-trends which may support a more pluralistic theory of the media at a global level. One trend is that of 'reverse flows', where media products in, for example, former colonies become popular and are sold to the previous colonizers. Reverse flows suggest that media imperialism is not absolute. An example of a reverse flow is the success of the Hindi-language Bollywood, based in Mumbai. Bollywood films are becoming more popular in the UK (the former

colonial power), the USA and Russia and come second only to Hollywood films in Australia.

A second criticism is that the thesis of media imperialism rests implicitly on the largely abandoned 'hypodermic needle' model of media. However, as we have seen, consumers are active rather than passive watchers and listeners and may reject, modify or reinterpret the messages in any media output. Liebes and Katz (1993) studied a range of subcultural audiences in Israel and their responses to the American series *Dallas*. Russians in Israel saw the programme as embodying a form of capitalist manipulation that children should not be allowed to watch. For Israeli Arabs, the sexual themes in *Dallas* were potentially embarrassing and, as a result, the show ought not to be watched in mixed-sex groups. They also saw a domineering villain such as J. R. Ewing as reflecting similar figures within the Israeli political establishment.

In a similar vein, Roland Robertson (1995) argued that a better concept for understanding global processes is *glocalization* (the mixture of globalizing and localizing forces) rather than globalization (see chapter 4 for discussion). This is because American corporations must take cognizance of local cultures if they are to market their products successfully around the world. And, in this process, the products are often significantly altered. The thesis of glocalization suggests that the simple one-way flow process suggested by media imperialism is likely to be the exception rather than the rule.

The titles of two studies by Tunstall, thirty years apart, tell a similar story. In *The Media Are American* (1977), he argued that the industrialization of mass media in America enabled it to dominate global media production. But, by *The Media Were American* (2007), his thesis was that the USA has lost its global dominance. The rise of India and China as media producers and consumers along with stronger national cultures and media systems has weakened the position of the United States in relation to the rest of the world.

Even so, the logic of capital accumulation remains an effective force: 'In the global media system, it is as if anything can be said, in any language, at any location, as long as it can be said profitably' (Hackett and Zhao

2005: 22). In that sense, it is capitalistic values rather than American national values that characterize the exchange of media products internationally.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Is 'media imperialism' an accurate description of the global influence of Western media and culture? How does media imperialism fit with Lyotard's postmodern thesis of the collapse of Western culture?

It is important to remember that attempts at total control of information sources and distribution channels rarely succeed, either because of intense competition or anti-trust legislation preventing monopolies or through the persistent and creative responses of media users seeking out alternative sources. Media consumers are not 'cultural dopes' who can be manipulated effortlessly by corporate interests. As the scope and volume of media forms and content expand, individuals are becoming more, not less, skilled in interpreting and evaluating the messages and material they encounter.

Alternative media

While the power and reach of the global media are undeniable, there are attempts to counter mainstream global media by using new technologies to facilitate alternative forms of news gathering. One of the more successful is the Independent Media Centre, or Indymedia, a global collective of independent media outlets associated with the anti-globalization movement. Since its creation in 1999, during a protest against the World Trade Organization in Seattle, Indymedia has sought to create open access online platforms, enabling political activists and citizens to upload their own videos, images and reports as well as live streaming of protest events. It is thought to have some 150 local centres across thirty countries.

Indymedia seeks to break down the barrier between media professionals and the public, encouraging people to participate in the production of news rather than being passive consumers of corporate

and state broadcast news. Although the internet is clearly central to the Indymedia project, local groups also produce publications, community radio stations, video, email lists, a wiki site and even TV stations in public access slots. However, the emergence and increasing popularity of individual blogs (which did not exist when Indymedia was created) has to some extent undermined its originality and functions (Ritzer 2011: 142–3). Anyone can now create and manage their own blog – the ultimate form of decentralization – and get their views and opinions published online.

Paradoxically, Indymedia has suffered from its democratic, open access approach, which allows many different individuals and groups to make use of the network, sometimes bringing heightened governmental surveillance and intervention. In 2004, its internet provider took down two hard drives from its server at the request of the FBI, effectively closing down twenty websites in thirteen countries. The FBI had received a request from the public prosecutor's office in Bologna, Italy, based on their claim that a violent Italian anarchist group involved in planting bombs and sending letter bombs to politicians had used Indymedia to claim responsibility for the attacks. It is unclear whether this was, in fact, the case. But it does highlight some of the problems with the loosely organized, networked model of Indymedia, which seems ill-equipped to resist the demands of states and security forces (Mueller 2011: 18–22).

Religion, tradition and popular outlooks can also be a brake on media globalization, while local regulations and domestic media institutions can play a role in limiting the impact of global media. The case of new media in the Middle East is an interesting one (see ['Global society'](#) [19.2](#)). In investigating the response of Islamic countries to the forces of media globalization, Ali Mohammadi (2002) found that resistance to the incursion of outside media forms has ranged from muted criticism to the outright banning of Western satellites. The reaction to media globalization and the action taken by individual countries in large part reflect their overall responses towards the legacy of Western colonialism and the encroachment of modernity.

[Global society 19.2](#) Global news from the Middle East: Al Jazeera

Despite being banned in some Middle East countries and seeing its broadcast centres in Afghanistan and Iraq attacked by the US military, Al Jazeera still offers a different perspective on world news today.

Until the mid-1980s, most television programming in the Islamic world was produced and distributed within national borders or through Arabsat – the pan-Arab satellite broadcasting network composed of twenty-one states. The liberalization of broadcasting and the power of global satellite TV have transformed the contours of television in the Islamic world. The events of the 1991 Gulf War made the Middle East a centre of attention for the global media industry and significantly affected television broadcasting and consumption within the region as well. Satellites spread rapidly, with Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Dubai, Tunisia and Jordan all launching satellite channels by 1993. By the end of the

decade, most Islamic states had established their own satellite channels, as well as accessing global media programmes.

Al Jazeera is the largest Arabic news channel in the Middle East, offering news coverage twenty-four hours a day. Founded in 1996, and based in Qatar, Al Jazeera is the fastest growing news network among Arab communities and Arabic-speaking people around the world. Some Western critics have argued that it is overly sensational and shows too much violent and emotionally charged footage from war zones, as well as giving disproportionate coverage to fundamentalist and extremist groups (Sharkey 2004). Its political programmes are popular, but other shows covering culture, sport and health help to increase the channel's audience share. However, many, perhaps most, TV stations use sensational stories to capture audiences, and it may be objected that Al Jazeera is simply reflecting its audience in the same way that Western outlets do.

Recent academic studies argue that Al Jazeera has played an influential role in breaking open state control of the Middle East media, encouraging open debate on important issues such as the invasion of Iraq, the situation in Palestine, and Arab identities (Lynch 2006; Zayani 2005; Miles 2005). The news channel has helped to change political and social debates not only in the Middle East but also in the West, where digital viewers can tune in for an alternative perspective on global events. (Al Jazeera now broadcasts from London and Washington, DC, as well as from Doha and Kuala Lumpur.)

In some majority Muslim states, the themes and material dealt with on Western television have created tensions. Programmes relating to gender and human rights issues are particularly controversial. Saudi-owned Orbit Communications launched the BBC Arabic Television service in 1994, broadcasting from Rome. The channel promised it would operate under usual BBC editorial news standards, but this soon became an issue. In 1996 *Panorama* covered the Saudi regime and the BBC insisted the programme should be aired in Arabic as well as English (McLellan 2007). After several acrimonious meetings, the collaboration was ended, and the channel was eventually relaunched in

2008 without Saudi financial support. Three Islamic states – Iran, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia – also banned satellite access to Western television, while Iran has been the staunchest opponent of the Western media, branding it a source of 'cultural pollution' and a promoter of Western consumer values.

Such strong responses are in the minority. Mohammadi (2002) concluded that, although some countries have responded to media globalization by attempting to resist or provide an alternative, most have found it necessary to accept certain modifications to their culture in order to maintain their own cultural identity. The 'traditionalist approach', such as that favoured by Iran and Saudi Arabia, is losing ground to responses based on adaptation and modernization.

[Conclusion](#)

As individuals, we do not control technological change, and some critics perceive that the sheer pace of the contemporary changes threatens to lead either to a Big Brother-style surveillance state or, alternatively, to social chaos. Undoubtedly the internet, wireless networks, smartphones and more are leading to changes in behaviour, but they do not entirely determine it. So far, at least, the overwhelmingly negative scenarios predicted by sceptics have failed to materialize.

Not only has the surveillance state not emerged, but the internet has facilitated decentralization, new forms of social networking, and the opening up of opportunities for ordinary people to produce their own music, film, news, and much more. Conventional books and other 'pre-electronic' media also look unlikely to disappear. Bulky as it is, the book you are reading is actually handier to use than the digitized version and much more flexible and portable, requiring no power source. Even e-book readers, such as the Kindle, Nook and Cybook, require a power source and cannot be handled and manipulated like a conventional book.

On the other hand, the new media are steadily canalizing or 'giving direction to' older media forms. Newspapers have moved online and are experimenting with subscriptions and payment methods to counter continuously falling sales. Music downloads have fatally undermined sales of music CDs, and DVD film sales continue to fall as online streaming increases. Even the future of that most successful global medium, television, is not immune. The development and rapid take-up of on-demand TV accessed via the internet over the last decade shows that the days of national populations watching TV programmes and events 'live' together may, with a few protected exceptions, have already come to an end. On the other hand, the rise of social media and shared online spaces offer new opportunities for active engagement, creative activity and discussion that traditional media could never achieve.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. What do sociologists mean by 'mass' media? List their main characteristics and provide a succinct working definition.

2. What kinds of technologies and devices have emerged from the digital revolution? In what ways has digitization changed mass communications?

3. How have the internet and worldwide web affected the business models of newspapers, music and television? Construct an argument that, on balance, the internet has been a positive development in both communications and social life.

4. What positive and negative aspects of television have been found? Assess the proposition that television is purely an entertainment medium whose content is passively consumed. Is it?

5. Explain the 'production of culture' approach in media studies in relation to the music industry. What are the short- and long-term benefits of online music sharing for musicians, audiences and companies?

6. Provide a short summary of the four theoretical perspectives discussed in the chapter. Are these mutually exclusive or do they speak to different aspects of the mass media?

7. What did the Frankfurt School mean by the 'culture industry'? Why was this seen as a negative development? Using contemporary examples, make the argument that the Frankfurt School was elitist and that the industrialization of culture has actually been beneficial for artists and audiences alike.

8. What does John Thompson mean by 'mediated quasi-interaction'? How does this differ from other types of interaction?

9. Compare Habermas's ideas on the decline of the public sphere with Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality. Which of these best fits our contemporary mix of media forms and content?

10. What have we learned about media messages and their reception from audience research studies?

11. The ownership of media is increasingly concentrated in large conglomerates. What evidence is there that this is becoming problematic for consumers? What impact have alternative media had so far, and is it likely that they can disrupt the mainstream global pattern of ownership?

🔎 [Research in practice](#)

Since 2016 the fake news phenomenon has provoked alarm among mainstream journalists and politicians, with some describing its rapid spread online as bringing about a crisis as the truth becomes ever more difficult to separate from deliberate misinformation. Much effort has been expended on working out how to counter fake news sources, but perhaps we need to understand the phenomenon better and define more precisely what we mean when discussing 'fake news'.

The paper below tries to explore the various uses of fake news in order to bring some clarity to academic studies. Read the piece and answer the questions that follow.

> Egelhofer, J. L., and Lecheler, S. (2019) 'Fake News as a Two-Dimensional Phenomenon: A Framework and Research Agenda', *Annals of the International Communication Association*, 43(2): 97–116.
>
> 1. What are the two dimensions of fake news described here? Provide two real-world examples of each.
>
> 2. What kind of research is this? How would you categorize it?
>
> 3. According to the authors, what are the three pillars of fake news? Explain why political satire, news parody, native advertising and bad journalism do not meet the criteria to be considered fake news.
>
> 4. The fake news concept appears similar to propaganda, conspiracy theories, disinformation and rumours. Explain how fake news differs from each of these.
>
> 5. What is meant by 'the fake news label' and why do the authors suggest that scholars should shift their attention to it?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Today we are familiar with the world of apps and platforms as businesses such as Alibaba, Amazon, Google, Facebook, Deliveroo, Uber and Airbnb have quickly become household names in many countries. We are also familiar with some of the problems associated with this business model, which find expression in the concept of the gig economy that is synonymous with exploitation, low wages, unreliable working hours and limited workers' rights. Although the gig sector is not dominant in the overall economy, some now argue that the platform model has moved way beyond just the high-tech firms.

Nick Srnicek (2016) argues that we have entered the period of 'platform capitalism', in which the platform business model becomes the norm. This is because contemporary capitalism relies on a new resource – data – which can be used to improve services and products that might give businesses an advantage over the competition. Data can also be harvested and sold to increase profits. Yet, there are clear dangers ahead as platform capitalism takes hold.

Read Srnicek's concise summary of his argument via this link: www.ippr.org/juncture-item/the-challenges-of-platform-capitalism. Also dip into his 2016 book, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity).

Write a 1,500-word essay exploring the numerous social problems associated with the dark side of the platform business model. Discuss how far the platform model might go and explain why Srnicek suggests that this form of capitalism will probably be short-lived.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

One of the most controversial uses of the internet has been the release of large amounts of confidential political and military documents by WikiLeaks – a group that enables whistleblowers to leak secret information into the public domain anonymously. A film about Wikileaks, *The Fifth Estate* (2013), directed by Bill Condon, details the founding and development of the grouping. Watch the film and then answer the following questions.

- What were the founders' original intentions? How successful were they in achieving these?

- Does WikiLeaks have an underpinning political philosophy? If so, what is it?

- During discussions about the Bradley Manning Iraq and Afghan War logs, what was the relationship between WikiLeaks and mainstream newspapers? What was the role of news journalists in decisions about what to do with the material?

- Do your own research into WikiLeaks. Its co-founder, Julian Assange, said that this film was 'a propaganda attack on WikiLeaks'. List the aspects of the film that may support his view. Overall, is the film pretty even-handed or is there a clear bias? If so, in what direction?

🗂 **<u>Further reading</u>**

An excellent introductory text is Paul Hodkinson's (2017) *Media, Culture and Society: An Introduction* (2nd edn, London: Sage), which is well structured and reliable. For the new digital media forms, see Eugenia Siapera's (2018) *Understanding New Media* (London: Sage), which is a comprehensive account.

On media theories, a good place to start is with Kevin Williams's (2016) *Understanding Media Theory* (2nd edn, New York: Bloomsbury Academic). Useful chapters can then be found in David Hesmondhalgh and Jason Toynbee's (2008) edited collection *The Media and Social Theory* (London: Routledge). John L. Sullivan's (2012) *Media Audiences: Effects, Users, Institutions and Power* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage) is a good survey of this field.

A very good selection of essays can be found in the edited collection by James Curran and David Hesmondhalgh (2019) *Media and Society* (6th edn, New York: Bloomsbury Academic), which is a very wide-ranging text. If you need a dictionary, then Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday's (2011) *Oxford Dictionary of Media and Communication* (Oxford: Oxford University Press) is the place to start.

For a collection of original readings on communication and the media, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Two key journals, good resources for media sociology articles:
New Media and Society – exactly what it says:
https://journals.sagepub.com/home/nms
and *Media, Culture and Society*, which has a broader remit:
https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mcs

Glasgow University Media Group's own website:
www.glasgowmediagroup.org/

Ofcom – the UK's independent media regulator site, which has some useful surveys:
www.ofcom.org.uk/

The Foundation for Information Policy Research – UK-based think tank studying the interaction between ICT and society:
www.fipr.org/

OECD, ICT Homepage – lots of comparative data on the digital economy:
www.oecd.org/internet/oecd-internet-economy-outlook-2012-978926486463-en.htm

Indymedia UK – British-based 'grassroots' site providing an alternative platform to mainstream news:
www.indymedia.org.uk/

The UK Broadcasters' Audience Research Board – lots of research and surveys on audiences here:
www.barb.co.uk/

CHAPTER 20

POLITICS, GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

CONTENTS

2016 was not a great year for political commentators and election pollsters in the Western democracies. In particular, the US presidential election and the UK EU referendum produced results that confounded many experts and led to serious questions about the condition and future direction of party politics in longstanding liberal democracies.

The Conservative Party won the 2015 UK general election and formed a government. Under pressure from the right wing of his party and the electoral threat posed by the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), party leader David Cameron had made a manifesto promise to hold a referendum on EU membership, which was set for 23 June 2016. The 'leave' campaigns focused on ending EU membership payments, instituting stronger immigration controls, calling a halt to EU bureaucratic interference and the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice (ECJ), having the ability to make new free trade deals around the world, and protecting the UK's national sovereignty. The official leave campaign summed all of this up in its central slogan, 'Let's Take Back

Control'. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) note that some 90 per cent of more than 300 academics and election pollsters predicted that the 'remain' campaign would triumph in the referendum. But the experts were wrong, as 51.9 per cent voted to leave and 48.1 per cent to remain (Electoral Commission 2019). The result was a major shock, with significant consequences for both the UK and the EU.

In advance of the 2016 general election in the USA, Hillary Clinton won the Democratic Party nomination as the candidate to succeed Barack Obama, who had served two terms of office. In the Republican Party selection process, a political novice, the businessman and reality TV star of *The Apprentice*, Donald J. Trump, announced his candidacy in June 2015. Against all political analysts' predictions, he won the race to become the presidential candidate. Trump's election campaign ran on the slogan 'Make America Great Again', highlighting major themes such as ending unauthorized immigration and building a large wall on the Mexican border, 'balancing' the US relationship with China, increasing military spending, and combating terrorism by eliminating the Islamic State (*Daesh*). Trump also set his face against international agreement and action on global warming, pledging instead to support US coal mining and to create many more 'good jobs' in his 'America first' strategy.

Trump was widely characterized as a 'populist' leader, railing against what he saw as the liberal political establishment. 'Drain the swamp' was one of his supporters' favourite rallying chants, hinting at clearing out the corrupt Washington establishment. Trump presented himself as the political outsider who understood business and was on the side of the workers and America itself. Serious political commentators and pollsters gave the newcomer very little to no chance of defeating the experienced Clinton, who was part of the political establishment. Yet, on 8 November, and despite losing the popular vote, Trump won a spectacular victory, winning thirty states (including many former Democratic strongholds) and thus the presidency. The combination of these two upsets in the same year seemed to suggest that a destabilization of 'normal' politics was under way.

In the UK referendum, mainstream parties – Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrats, Scottish Nationalists, Plaid Cymru and the Greens –

all campaigned to remain in the EU. Leave campaigners saw them as part of a Europe-wide, liberal, cosmopolitan elite that had drifted far away from many ordinary UK voters' attitudes and needs. In the US, Trump's Republican competitors for the candidacy often appeared closer in policy terms and rhetoric to Democrat politicians than to Trump, whose agenda and language were very different. In 2016 a growing perception crystallized that the stability of many established party-political systems was breaking down in the face of a reinvigorated nationalism or national populism. Tormey (2019) argues that populism is an 'extraordinary' form of politics that presents ordinary politics as the source of the nation's problems. Disrupting the 'business as usual' situation, as we will see later, is key to populism's appeal.

This nationalist wave can also be seen in other countries and regions, both before and after 2016. For example, in Europe, among the best-known right-wing populist parties are the National Rally (formerly the National Front) in France, Italy's *Lega* (League), the Alternative for Germany (AfD), *Jobbik* (Movement for a Better Hungary) and *Fidesz* in Hungary, and *Vox* in Spain. However, we should note that national populism can also be found on the political and socialist left, for instance in Spain's *Podemos* party, and particularly in some of the anti-capitalist and anti-globalization movements in Latin America. But what exactly is meant by populism? We return to this question later, in the section on political ideologies, because, although it is relatively easy to point to examples around the world, arriving at an agreed definition of populism has proved more difficult.

The chapter starts with a discussion of some key themes in political sociology, including the fundamental concept of power, types of authority and forms of government. We then compare and contrast political ideologies, both old and the more recently developed. From here the chapter moves on to the dramatic fall of the Soviet Union and an outline of the prospects for democracy around the world. The chapter then ends with the less formal political activities of social movements in an age of globalization.

Political sociology

Many people believe that politics is either remote from their everyday lives or uninteresting, but probably both. Until quite recently, formal politics in much of Europe and North America also seemed to be the exclusive preserve of middleaged, middle-class white men, who dominated Western parliaments and assemblies. The situation has changed quite significantly today as more women and people from minority ethnic groups have become members of parliamentary bodies and government ministers. But the belief persists that it is government and political party competition that constitute the main arena of politics.

Yet politics is a contested concept, and the proper sphere of 'the political' goes well beyond the formal processes of governments and electoral party rivalries. The 2003 anti-war movement in Britain mobilized more than 1 million people, who were protesting with an overtly political goal – to prevent governments invading Iraq. Similarly, many of the groups, networks and organizations discussed elsewhere in this book may be viewed as 'political'. Wherever people band together to change society, to amend or defend existing laws or otherwise to exert an impact, we can say that their activities are, at least in part, political.

Whether we like it or even realize it, all our lives are touched by what happens in this political sphere. Even in the narrow sense, government decisions affect quite personal activities and, in times of war, can even order us to lay down our lives for aims that others deem necessary. The Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 showed this with great clarity as national governments around the world passed emergency legislation not seen outside wartime. Governments gave wider powers to police forces to detain citizens, effectively closed down businesses, and imposed lockdown conditions on their populations that restricted normal activities and freedom of movement. The sphere of government is where state power is exercised, though political life more generally is about power: who holds it, how they achieve it and what they do with it.

Where there is a political apparatus of government with institutions such as a parliament and an administration (or civil service) that rules over a given territory and whose authority is backed by a legal system and the capacity to use military force, we can say that a state exists. A majority of modern societies are nation-states in which the mass of the population consists of citizens who regard themselves as part of a single nation. Nation-states have been regularly created around the world – for example, the United States in 1776, the Czech Republic in 1993 and South Sudan in 2011. The following aspects characterize nation-states.

1. *Sovereignty* Before the emergence of nation-states, the territories governed by ruling regimes were poorly defined and central government control was relatively weak. But nation-states are sovereign states with supreme authority over a more distinct, bounded territory.

2. *Citizenship* Most of the people ruled by kings and emperors in earlier times had little awareness of those who ruled and had no political rights or influence. Only the dominant classes or wealthy social groups belonged to a political community. In nation-states, people within the borders of a political system are citizens with common rights and duties. Almost everyone in the world today belongs to a national political order.

3. *Nationalism* Nation-states are associated with the rise of nationalism – a set of symbols and beliefs creating a consciousness of being part of a shared political and cultural community. Individuals feel a sense of pride and belonging in being French, Ghanaian, Russian, and so on. Nationalism is the main expression of identification with a large cultural community – a nation.

We explore the phenomenon of nationalism in detail in <u>chapter 21</u>, 'Nations, War and Terrorism'. Citizenship is covered in <u>chapter 11</u>, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

Power

The meaning, nature and distribution of power are central issues for political sociologists. Max Weber (1979 [1925]: 53) defined power as 'the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance, regardless of the basis on which this probability rests.' For Weber, power is about getting your way, even against opposition from others. Many sociologists have followed Weber in distinguishing forms of power that are *coercive* from those that have *authority*. For example, opponents of the 2003 invasion of Iraq criticized the American-led invasion because it did not have explicit authority from the United Nations, which made it an illegitimate – that is, coercive use of power.

Weber's discussion distinguished three different categories or 'ideal types' of authority: traditional, charismatic and rational-legal authority. *Traditional authority* is power legitimized through respect for long-established cultural patterns, such as the hereditary family rule of nobles in medieval Europe. By contrast, *charismatic authority* tends to disrupt tradition. It is drawn from the devotion felt towards a leader by those who believe the leader possesses exceptional personal qualities. Jesus Christ and Adolf Hitler are often used as examples of individuals with charismatic authority. Yet there are many more mundane forms: the authority of certain school teachers may be, in part, charismatic. In Weber's view, most societies in the past were characterized by traditional authority structures, periodically punctuated by bursts of charisma.

In the modern world, Weber argued, rational-legal authority was increasingly replacing traditional forms. This is power legitimized through legally enacted rules and regulations, found in modern organizations, bureaucracies and government, all of which Weber (1948) described as the formal organizations that direct the political life of a society.

Foucault on power

The French historian and philosopher Michel Foucault (1926–1984) devised a highly influential account of power, far removed from Weber's more formal definition. Foucault declared that power was not concentrated in one institution, such as the state, or held by any group of individuals. These older models of power, including that of Lukes, relied on fixed identities where power was held by groups that were identifiable, such as a ruling class, a government or men in general. Instead, according to Foucault, power operates at all levels of social interaction, in all social institutions and through all people.

Classic studies 20.1 Stephen Lukes – a 'radical view' of power

The research problem

Some research problems in sociology are theoretical rather than empirical. Often, sociologists need systematically to think through their key concepts in order to clarify them and expand their reach. The concept of power, for example, has been contested, provoking much disagreement. Is power something people can hold, like other material possessions? Is it something that can be shared? Or is it more indirectly observed, existing only in the relationships between people? Stephen Lukes attempted to think through the concept of power in order to cover all of its possible empirical instances.

Lukes's explanation

Weber's perspective on power remains a valuable starting point for political sociologists, but an alternative and 'radical' view of power was proposed by Stephen Lukes (2004 [1974]). In his classic account, Lukes offers what he calls a 'three-dimensional view' of power. One-dimensional studies focus on the ability to make decisions go one's own way in observable conflicts. For example, if the British government had changed its support for military intervention in Iraq in response to the anti-war protests in February 2003, it would have been evidence that the protestors had power. One-dimensional analyses look at the behaviour of participants in the making of decisions, particularly where there is a conflict of interests. It then becomes observable, when a decision is made, which side is 'powerful'. Lukes argues that this is a somewhat restricted view of power.

A two-dimensional perspective builds on this, looking at the ability of social actors and groups to control which issues are decided on. By this, Lukes means that groups or individuals can also exercise power by limiting the alternatives available to others. For example, one way in which authoritarian governments exert power is by placing restrictions on what the press can report. In doing so, they

are able to prevent grievances from becoming issues within the political process. On the two-dimensional view of power, we should examine not just observable decisions and policies but also how the decision-making agenda itself is created. Which issues are kept *off* the agenda?

Lukes argues that, building on the previous two types, there is also a three-dimensional perspective, which makes for a 'radical view' of power. He calls this the 'manipulation of desires' and asks (Lukes 2004 [1974]: 27): 'Is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires?' This does not necessarily mean that people are 'brainwashed'. Our desires can be manipulated in very subtle ways.

Neo-Marxists, such as Herbert Marcuse and members of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, claim that, for example, through the media and other agencies of socialization, capitalists exercise power over workers by shaping their desires to take on the roles of worker and passive consumer. Lukes's point is that this 'ideological' exercise of power is not observable or measurable but can be inferred when people act in ways that are against their interests. In his theoretical analysis of power, Lukes (2004 [1974]: 37) arrives at a broader definition than Weber: 'A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests.'

See chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives', for a discussion of critical theory.

Critical points

Lukes's work has had a strong influence on the way sociologists approach issues of power. However, it is not without its critics. One problem with his radical view is that it leaves open the question of

how we, as sociologists, can know what people's 'interests' really are. The adequacy of the radical view rests on how we address this question, but it has proved a very difficult one to answer in any conclusive way.

A second, related problem is that the three-dimensional perspective asks us to study nondecisions and the unobservable influence of ideologies on people's desires. But how can sociologists study things that do *not* happen or that they cannot observe? Finally, it may be objected that Lukes's three-dimensional view is not really a theory of power at all but an acknowledgement of the influence of social structures on individuals. If this is so, then it amounts to a theory of structural determination rather than the *exercise* of power.

Contemporary significance

Lukes's 1974 work was quite a short analytical piece, and in 2004 he published a second edition containing two new essays, bringing his arguments up to date. In particular, he discusses Foucault's theory of power, defending the three-dimensional view against more general (Foucauldian) ideas of power as running through all social relations in equal measure. However, following both feminist theories of how male domination is established through the closing down of women's expectations and Amartya Sen's (2001) work on the concept of 'development' as lying in the *capacities* of people to 'live the kind of lives they value – and have reason to value', Lukes argues that power is similarly a 'capacity' or set of human 'capabilities', drawing attention to the way in which these can be denied or enhanced. His influential argument in favour of a radical view of power seems set to continue as the standard reference point for debates on the subject.

'A exercises power over B when A affects B in a manner contrary to B's interests.' What real-world examples are there that would fit Lukes's statement? Thinking about using sociological research methods, how might we be able to establish what constitutes 'B's interests'?

Foucault's ideas were introduced in chapter 3, 'Theories and Perspectives'.

Power and knowledge are closely intertwined, serving to reinforce each other, and Foucault often uses power-knowledge as a single concept (Kelly 2009: 44). The claims to knowledge of a doctor, for example, are also claims to power, as they are put into practice in an institutional context (a hospital) where that knowledge is operationalized. The increase in knowledge about health and illness gave more power to doctors, who claimed authority over their patients. Foucault describes the development of discourses – ways of thinking about and discussing issues such as crime, health or welfare – which effectively set limits to how these are 'known'. In the field of health, for example, we might talk about a medical discourse, based on scientific medicine and the practice of medical professionals, which sidelines existing folk practices and alternative therapies. In this way, discourses create dominant meanings and support the claims to knowledge and power of certain groups against alternative meanings and forms of knowledge.

Foucault's ideas have gained popularity as political sociology has shifted away from conventional conflict theories, especially Marxism, towards forms of political struggle based on identity, such as gender or sexuality (Foucault 1967, 1978). As power is found in all social relations rather than being exercised by dominant groups, Foucault's

account breaks down the simple division between authoritative and coercive forms of power. His conception therefore effectively widens the concept of 'the political'.

Although Foucault provided a very subtle account of power in everyday social interactions, his hazy conception of the term has been seen as underestimating concentrations of power in structures such as the military, political elites or 'higher' social classes. For example, can Foucault's conception adequately explain how the Kim dynasty in North Korea has managed to remain in power from 1948 to the present-day leader, Kim Jong-un? It may be that this 'hereditary dictatorship' has been successful because it managed to concentrate power in the hands of a small political and military elite which violently suppressed all opposition. In such cases, the older idea of power as the ability to get your own way, even against opposition and using force if necessary, is a better way of explaining the dynasty's hold on the country. The debate on authoritarian systems is fleshed out in the next section, where we turn from theories of power to the exercise of power in contrasting political systems.

Authoritarianism and democratic politics

A variety of political systems have been found throughout history, and twenty-first-century societies around the world are organized according to different patterns and configurations. At the end of 2017, 96 of 167 countries (57 per cent) with populations over 500,000 claimed to be democracies. Another 21 were autocratic (13 per cent), while the other 46 (28 per cent) had a mix of democratic and autocratic elements (Desilver 2019). While most societies now claim to be democratic – that is, they involve the mass of people in decision-making as citizens – other forms of political rule also exist. In this section we shall profile democracy and authoritarianism, two of the basic types of political system.

Forms of authoritarianism

If democracies encourage the active involvement of citizens in political affairs, in authoritarian states popular participation is denied or

severely curtailed. In such societies, the needs and interests of the state are prioritized over those of average citizens, and no legal mechanisms exist for opposing the government or removing a leader from power.

Authoritarian governments exist today in some countries which profess themselves to be 'democratic'. The Democratic People's Republic of Korea, commonly called 'North Korea', is an example of an authoritarian state. Powerful [monarchies](#) in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and the military regime in Myanmar (Burma) strictly curtail citizens' civil liberties, denying them meaningful political participation. Myanmar saw significant change following the release from house arrest of the opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi in 2010, a development that appeared to demonstrate that such militaristic regimes do not have total control.

In 2015, Suu Kyi's political party, the National League for Democracy, won around 80 per cent of the seats in a national election, giving it 387 out of 478 seats (BBC News 2015b). President Thein Sein promised a smooth transfer of power, though the constitution reserves 25 per cent of seats for army personnel and retains significant influence with a veto on constitutional change. Since becoming *de facto* leader in 2016, Suu Kyi's reputation as a supporter of human rights has collapsed. This is largely because of a military crackdown on Rohingya Muslims in the country, which forced hundreds of thousands to flee into neighbouring Bangladesh. Suu Kyi was widely seen not only as failing to act to prevent rapes, murder and attempted genocide but also seeking to justify the military's actions at the International Court of Justice (BBC News 2020b). The quashing of the high expectations associated with tentative democratic change suggests that many commentators underestimated the difficulties in moving decisively away from military rule.

A show of military strength at a May Day parade in North Korea, probably the most politically isolated and authoritarian country in the world.

Singapore is often cited as an example of so-called soft authoritarianism. This is because the ruling People's Action Party maintains a tight grip on power but also ensures a high quality of life for its citizens, intervening in almost all aspects of society. Singapore is notable for its safety, its civil order and the social inclusion of its citizens. It is economically successful, the streets are clean, people are employed and poverty is virtually unknown. Yet, despite the high standard of living, even minor transgressions, such as dropping litter or smoking in public, are punishable by stiff fines; there is tight regulation of the media, internet access and ownership of satellite dishes. The police possess extraordinary powers to detain citizens for suspected offences, and the use of corporal and capital judicial punishments is common. Despite this strict control, popular satisfaction with the government is relatively high, a good example of what Brooker (2013) calls 'performance legitimacy'. That is, the concerns of citizens about the lack of real democracy or allegations of political corruption tend to

be overridden by the country's economic successes and administrative competence.

Arguably, Singapore's soft authoritarianism enabled it to take the rapid measures needed to curb the potential spread of Covid-19 in 2020. From its first few identified cases in January, border restrictions and tests were introduced, an extensive contact-tracing programme was implemented, home quarantine was strictly enforced and tests were free for all. Initially, the country looked to have the epidemic under control. However, towards the end of April 2020, the infection rate had risen rapidly, mainly affecting migrant workers, who lived in overcrowded and unsanitary dormitories, the largest of which housed 24,000 people (Ratcliffe 2020). Although citizen satisfaction with the regime may be high, the pandemic highlighted the stark and unequal treatment of the migrant workforce. Singapore may lack democratic freedoms, but the country's brand of authoritarianism is different from the more dictatorial regimes. The novelist William Gibson (1993) described it as 'Disneyland with the death penalty'. It seems that economically successful authoritarian regimes need not breed mass disaffection and revolt, though these regimes are in the minority compared to democracies.

Some regimes today may best be characterized as 'semi-authoritarian' (Ottaway 2003) or 'competitive authoritarian' (Levitsky and Way 2010). Levitsky and Way argue that these are 'civilian regimes in which formal democratic institutions exist and are widely viewed as the primary means of gaining power, but in which incumbents' abuse of the state places them at a significant advantage vis-à-vis opponents' (ibid.: 5). Russia under President Putin may be the clearest example of this type.

In Russia, some individual rights are evident, and periodic elections are held with representatives forming a parliament. Yet power is increasingly strengthened and centralized in the presidential office, which keeps a tight control over much of the mass media and some key industries, such as defence and hydrocarbons, and is able to rely on the defence and security forces (Chaguaceda 2016: 81). In a speech to the parliament, the Duma, in March 2020, President Putin said that 'The president is the guarantor of the constitution ... simply put, the

guarantor of the country's security, domestic stability and … evolutionary development' (*The Economist* 2020b). And although his two terms in office end in 2024, a package of constitutional reforms approved by a public vote in June 2020 paved the way for Putin to carry on, perhaps for two more terms, until 2036 (Osborn and Soldatkin 2020).

Regimes such as Russia maintain the appearance and rhetoric of being 'democratic' while strictly limiting free political competition and civil liberties. Such regimes can also be found in most parts of the world, including in some Eastern European states that were once part of the Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, the Balkans and some Arab states. For example, in Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, 'former Communist Party bosses have transformed themselves into elected presidents, but in reality remain strongmen whose power is barely checked by weak democratic institutions' (Ottaway 2003: 3). Ottaway sees semi-authoritarianism as a way in which authoritarian regimes can survive the increasing pressure from disillusioned citizens demanding more individual freedom and democracy. But what is meant by democracy and democratic politics?

Democratic politics

The word [democracy](#) has its roots in the Greek term *demokratia*: *demos* ('people') and *kratos* ('rule'). Democracy is therefore a political system in which it is the people, not monarchs or aristocracies, who rule. This sounds straightforward enough, but it is not. Democratic rule has taken contrasting forms at varying periods and in different societies. For example, 'the people' has been understood to mean variously all men, all owners of property, all white educated men, and all adult men and women. In some societies the officially accepted version of democracy is limited to the political sphere, but in others it is extended to broader areas of social life.

The form that democracy takes in a given context is largely the outcome of how its values and goals are understood and prioritized. Democracy is generally seen as the political system most able to ensure political equality, the protection of liberty and freedom, defence of the common interest, and meeting citizens' needs, while promoting moral

development and effective decision-making (Held 2006: 2–3). The weight that is granted to these various goals may influence whether democracy is regarded as a form of popular power (self-government and self-regulation) or whether it is seen as a framework for supporting decision-making by others (such as elected representatives).

In [participatory democracy](#) ('direct' democracy), decisions are made communally by all those affected by them. This was the original form practised in ancient Greece. Citizens – a small minority of the society – regularly assembled to consider policies and make major decisions. But participatory democracy is of limited importance in modern societies with very large populations, though some aspects still play a part.

Small communities in New England, in the north-eastern part of the United States, continue the traditional practice of annual 'town meetings'. On designated days, residents gather to discuss and vote on local issues. Another example of participatory democracy is the holding of referenda, when the people express their views on a particular, usually highly significant, issue. For example, Scotland held a referendum on independence from the UK in September 2014, while the UK itself held a national referendum on EU membership in June 2016. Referenda have also been used to decide contentious issues of secession in ethnic nationalist regions such as Quebec (in 1995), the predominantly Frenchspeaking province of Canada.

Today [representative democracy](#) is the more common form of democratic government. Representative democracy is a political system in which decisions are taken not directly by all members of society but by others who have been elected for this purpose. In national governments, representative democracy takes the form of elections to congresses, parliaments or similar bodies.

Today, most of these societies usually (though not always) have a written constitution, an independent judiciary and laws that guarantee election procedures, secret ballots, competitive parties, freedom of the press and rights of assembly (Alonso et al. 2011: 1). In this form, they are often described as 'liberal democracies'. Representative democracy as a mechanism of decision-making also exists at other levels, such as in provinces or regions, cities, counties, boroughs and smaller regions.

Many large organizations also run their affairs using forms of representative democracy by electing a small executive to take key decisions on behalf of the whole membership. Representative democracies exist across both the Global North and the Global South and, as we shall see later, their number is growing. But before we explore the spread of democracy, we consider elite theory and the role of bureaucracies within ostensibly democratic systems of government.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Some politicians in representative systems argue that referenda should not be more widely used just because digital technology makes voting easier. Provide some reasons why representative democracy and the extended use of referenda may lead to conflicts.

Elites and bureaucracies against democracy?

Democratic politics appears to be the dominant form in the world today, and it seems obvious that politicians are public officials who serve their constituents and citizens. But is this just the surface appearance? For some, including a range of populist leaders today, societies continue to be ruled by small elites, despite all outward appearances. For others, democracy is undermined by large bureaucracies which wield far more power than the common idea of a 'neutral' administration might suggest. In this section we look at both elite theory and ideas of bureaucratic domination.

Elites and elite theory

An influential perspective on politics and a critique of democratic ideals comes from theories of political and social elites. Elite theorists view democracy as a sham or mirage which masks the fundamental fact that rule by a minority over the majority has been, is and always will be the case. In particular, and against Marxist theory, societies are ruled by powerful political elites rather than a coherent, economic ruling class.

The classical elite theories are found in the work of Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941), Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) and Robert Michels (1876–1936) (Berberoglu 2005: 29). Their key works were published in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, a time of rising trade unions and other working-class organizations in the industrializing countries. To varying degrees, elite theories were influenced by this development, which some viewed with trepidation and others as promising a utopian but completely unrealistic image of a democratic future.

Pareto used the concept of 'elite' to describe governing or ruling groups, and he saw societies as divided into two: a small elite and a large 'non-elite' or 'mass'. But the elite group is also divided into those who govern or rule and those who, although part of the elite, play no part in actually governing. For Pareto, elites are characterized by the superior intelligence, knowledge and skills of the individuals who comprise them. Hence, a governing elite must draw from different strata, including from the masses, if it is to be successful. Elites that restrict membership – to, say, only men of a certain social class – fail to make use of the available human resources and are unable to reinvigorate themselves. The circulation of top individuals between elite and non-elite helps to keep an elite vibrant and to stave off challengers. Yet history shows that, while particular governing elites may rule for a time, it is inevitable that they will eventually be replaced: 'History is a graveyard of aristocracies' (Pareto 1935 [1916]: 1430).

This is the second aspect of the 'circulation of elites' – that established elites inevitably become decadent or stagnant and give way to rising groups. In this process the entire elite group changes, but what never changes is the principle of elite rule itself. All notions of 'rule by the people for the people', power-sharing and social equality are pipe dreams. In reality, power is always monopolized by small, highly organized elites. And, even though one elite may collapse or be overthrown, the result will be the installation and establishment of a new elite better equipped to rule.

Mosca's (1939 [1896]) ideas have a family resemblance to those of Pareto. He also sees society divided into two classes: a small ruling class and a large ruled class. And though he uses the term 'class', his

concepts are far removed from Marxist or sociological definitions and lie much closer to the concept of broader elite theory (Marshall 2007: 10). Mosca argued that elite rule is inevitable and that Marx's vision of a classless society is untenable, disproven by the facts of history. Ruling elites are essentially coalitions of people drawn from the military, religious organizations, academia and other social groups with their own special talents or power bases. The elite is then a political elite which monopolizes power and dominates the masses. For both Mosca and Pareto, the 'mass' constitutes an incoherent majority, easily swayed by simple ideas and ideals (such as 'equality' or 'freedom') and subject to manipulation by elite groups. Neither theorist saw any potential for a working-class revolution as predicted by Marx.

A third theorist of elites was Robert Michels (1967 [1911]), whose ideas competed with those of Weber. Michels was a disillusioned former member of the social democratic party (SPD) in Germany who saw that not only do elites rise to the top of the state apparatus, but the process also operates in all organizations, right across society (Slattery 2003: 52–3). In particular, Michels argued that, even in apparently radical political parties, trade unions and other democratically inspired organizations, a small elite dominates and rules in its own interests. He called this process the iron law of oligarchy, the inevitable 'rule by the few'. The flow of power towards the top is just one aspect of our increasingly organized and bureaucratized world. But was Michels right?

It is surely correct that many large-scale organizations involve the centralization of power and routine decision-making by a few. Yet there is good reason to suppose that the 'iron law of oligarchy' is not quite so hard and fast as Michels (or Mosca and Pareto) thought. First, as organizations expand in size, power relationships can become looser. Those at the middle and lower levels may have little influence over general policies forged at the top, but power is often delegated downwards as corporate heads are so busy coordinating, coping with crises and analysing budgets that they have little time for original thinking. Many corporate leaders frankly admit that, for the most part, they simply accept the conclusions given to them.

Since the 1970s sociologists have recognized the increasing significance of 'weak ties' and technologically advanced, loosely connected social networks in economic, political and social life (Granovetter 1973; Castells 1996b). In a digital age, when globalization continues to reshape business organization and political decision-making, power seems to have become more fluid, and powerful networks are potentially open to a broader range of individuals from across the social spectrum. Hence, it may be becoming more difficult for small elites to gain power and to retain it.

See chapter 19, 'The Media', for a theoretical discussion of social networks.

On the other hand, research into the powerful positions in UK society – top judges, MPs and cabinet members, members of the House of Lords, senior army officers, and so on – reveals that these continue to be dominated by those who are privately educated at a small number of independent schools (Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 2014). Sociological studies since the 1950s have found elite formation in the USA (Mills 1956), France and the UK (Maclean et al. 2006; Scott 1991), as well as at the transnational level (Carroll 2004).

It seems likely that 'elite' is still the most accurate description of certain powerful groups of people, despite the rise to prominence of new social networks. But assessing whether such elites are really coherent or as powerful in shaping social life today as they were in, say, the nineteenth century is an ongoing task for empirical researchers.

Bureaucracy against democracy?

The word bureaucracy was coined in 1745 by adding 'bureau' (an office and a writing table) to the Greek *kratos*, meaning 'rule'. Bureaucracy is thus 'the rule of officials'. From the beginning, the concept was used in a disparaging way. The French novelist Honoré de Balzac saw

bureaucracy as 'the giant power wielded by pygmies', while the Czech author Franz Kafka gave a nightmarish depiction of an impersonal and unintelligible bureaucracy in his novel *The Trial* (1925). This view persists: bureaucracies are widely seen as powerful yet irrational, and the image of the 'faceless bureaucrat' is someone who lacks sensitivity and compassion (Lune 2010: 5).

Clearly, complex modern societies need some formal organization if things are to run smoothly. But many people see organizations in a negative light as stifling individual creativity and obstructive when we need help. How can organizations be perceived as both necessary yet unhelpful? Is this a relatively minor problem of perception or something much more deep-rooted and serious? Max Weber developed a systematic interpretation of the rise of modern organizations, emphasizing that they depend on the control of information, and he stressed the importance of writing in this process. Organizations need *written* rules to function and files in which organizational 'memory' is stored. But Weber detected a clash, as well as a connection, between modern organizations and democracy which has far-reaching consequences for social life.

In order to study bureaucratic organizations, Weber constructed an ideal-typical bureaucracy. 'Ideal' here refers not to the most desirable but to a 'pure' form. An ideal type is an abstract description constructed by accentuating certain features of real cases so as to pinpoint their most essential characteristics (see chapter 1). Weber (1979 [1925]) listed several characteristics of the ideal type of bureaucracy.

1. There is a clear-cut hierarchy of authority and tasks are distributed as 'official duties'. A bureaucracy looks like a pyramid, with the positions of highest authority at the top. Each higher office controls and supervises the one below it.

2. Written rules govern the conduct of officials at all levels. The higher the office, the more the rules encompass a wide variety of cases and demand flexibility in their interpretation.

3. Officials are full-time and salaried and individuals are expected to make a career within the organization. Promotion is based on capability and seniority, or a mixture of the two.

4. There is a separation between the tasks of officials within the organization and their life outside, with the two being physically separated.

5. No members of the organization own the resources with which they work. Officials do not own their offices, their desks or the machinery they use.

Weber often likened bureaucracies to sophisticated machines operating via the principle of rationality. But he also recognized that bureaucracies could be inefficient and accepted that many bureaucratic jobs are dull, offering little opportunity for creativity. Nonetheless, he concluded that bureaucratic routine and the authority of officialdom are prices we pay for technical effectiveness. On the other hand, the diminishing of democracy with the advance of bureaucratic organization was something that was more worrying. How can democracy be anything other than a meaningless slogan in the face of increasing bureaucratic domination?

Some maintain that Weber's account is a *partial* one. It concentrates on the formal aspects of organizations and has little to say about their informal life, which introduces a welcome flexibility into otherwise rigid systems (Blau 1963). Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that formal rules are often 'myths' that have little substance in reality. They legitimize ways in which tasks are carried out, even while these diverge from the rules as laid out. Similarly, workers entering organizational settings need to 'learn the ropes', and informal methods can be more important than formal training as the idealistic expectations of new entrants are adjusted to the complex, mundane reality of their position (Watson 2008: 213).

Yet others claim that Weber let bureaucracy off too lightly – that its consequences are actually *more* damaging than he thought. For example, in different ways, both George Ritzer's thesis of the McDonaldization of society and Zygmunt Bauman's account of the mass murder of Jews and other groups during the Second World War show that bureaucratic systems have been and still are more damaging and potentially destructive than Weber ever considered (see chapter 3 and chapter 21 respectively). It is unfair to expect Weber to have foreseen

all of the consequences of bureaucratization, and some criticisms of the direction of social change can be conceded. But a majority of later studies of bureaucracy have been forced either to engage in debates with his influential interpretation or to attempt to take his ideas further. This probably demonstrates that he put his finger on a crucial aspect of what it is like to live in the modern world.

Even in democratic countries, government organizations hold enormous amounts of information about people, today mostly digitally, from records of our date of birth, schools attended and jobs held, to data on income used for tax-collecting and information used for issuing drivers' licences and allocating National Insurance numbers. Since we do not always know what information is held and which agencies are holding it, people fear that surveillance activities undermine the principle of democracy. These fears formed the basis of George Orwell's famous novel *1984*, in which the state bureaucracy, 'Big Brother', uses surveillance to suppress internal criticism and differences of opinion that are normal in any democracy.

Defending bureaucracy

Paul du Gay (2000) admitted that 'These are not the best days for bureaucracy.' As we have seen, 'bureaucracy' still carries negative connotations, but du Gay resists this characterization. While recognizing that bureaucracies can and do have flaws, he seeks to defend bureaucracy against the most common lines of criticism.

Were Nazi concentration camps, such as Auschwitz, facilitated by bureaucratization, or was bureaucratic impartiality overridden by racist policy-making?

First, du Gay argues against the idea that bureaucracies are 'faceless', purely administrative and lacking ethical foundations. He singles out Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989) as an important instance here. Bauman argues that the development of modern bureaucracies made the Holocaust during the Second World War practically possible. The planned genocide of millions by the Nazi regime could only happen once organizations were in place that distanced people from taking moral responsibility for their actions. Rather than being a barbaric *breakdown* of modern civilized conduct, Bauman contends that the Holocaust was *made possible* because modernity's rational, bureaucratic institutions separated discrete tasks from their consequences. German bureaucrats followed orders and carried out their allotted tasks to the best of their abilities – making sure that a railway line had been built or that a group of people was moved from one part of the country to another – rather than questioning the purpose of the whole system.

Du Gay states that quite the opposite was the case. For the Holocaust to be possible, he argues, the Nazis had to *overcome* legitimate and ethical procedures that are integral to the bureaucratic operation. One aspect of this was the demand for unquestioning allegiance to the Führer ('leader') rather than to the objective codes of the bureaucracy. Du Gay holds that bureaucracies have an important public ethos, which includes the equal and impartial treatment of all citizens. For du Gay, the Holocaust became possible when the racist convictions of Nazis *overcame* that impartial application of rules.

Du Gay also defends bureaucracy against a second line of attack, rejecting what he sees as the currently fashionable talk of the need for entrepreneurial reform of bureaucracies, especially public services. He stresses that the ethos of bureaucratic impartiality is being undermined by an increasingly politicized civil service, which is enthusiastic to get the job done in the way that best pleases politicians. Yet the bureaucratic framework itself ensures an administrative responsibility for the public interest as well as constitutional legitimacy. In sum, what really threatens democracy is not bureaucracy but the illegitimate overriding of conventional bureaucratic norms.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Think of a time when you dealt with a bureaucracy, maybe a university admissions system, health service, mobile phone provider or bank. List the *negative* and *positive* aspects of the encounter. Could that task be organized any more efficiently than via a bureaucracy?

Political ideologies

An inescapable aspect of political sociology is the study of political ideas, ideologies and political theory and their impact in shaping societies. *Political ideas* and concepts such as equality, justice, freedom and individual rights are used in a variety of ways even by people who would never see themselves as 'political'. *Political theory* is very old indeed, traceable to ancient Greece and its philosophers, who not only

tried to understand the world but also tackled thorny moral and normative questions, such as which actions constitute a good moral life? What are the elements that make up a 'good society'? How can we know that actions are 'just' and 'fair'? Such questions are still asked by political theorists today. Ideology is clearly related to political ideas and political theory, but its meaning is more complex.

When an idea or statement is described as 'ideological', the implication is that it is in some way false, misleading or partial rather than being 'true'. This meaning was popularized in Marx's work and that of later Marxists. For Marx, ideology is produced by ruling classes as a means of mystifying social life, thus distorting the exploitative reality faced by subordinate classes. This is a 'negative' conception of ideology. As Marx famously argued (Marx and Engels 1970 [1846]: 64), 'The class which has the material means of production at its disposal has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it.'

Yet this meaning is very far from the term's origins. 'Ideology' was first used in late eighteenth-century revolutionary France by Destutt de Tracy to describe a potential science of ideas and knowledge. De Tracy intended ideology to be the systematic study and comparison of ideas in much the same way as other sciences studied their subject matter. This version is known as a 'neutral' conception, which doesn't suggest that ideas are biased or misleading (Heywood 2017: 4).

This neutral conception was revived in the 1930s and 1940s when Karl Mannheim developed a sociology of knowledge that linked particular modes of thought to their social class bases. Mannheim argued that people view the world from a particular perspective rooted in their material life and therefore the ideas and knowledge they produce can be only partial. The sociology of knowledge would bring the differing perspectival interpretations together to produce a more comprehensive understanding of society as a whole. On the whole, Mannheim's version lost out to the negative version of ideology that has dominated sociological work since the 1950s.

Political ideologies are perhaps best seen as coherent sets of ideas which explain the existing society but also include a vision of a better, future society and a means of how to get there. In this sense ideologies are worldviews that also contain guides to political action. Most ideologies actually critique the existing social order, though some seek to defend it against such critiques. Most of the ideologies discussed in this section feature elsewhere in the book, and a search of the index will guide readers to the relevant chapters and sections.

The three 'classical' political ideologies of conservatism, liberalism and socialism were developed as a consequence of the American and French revolutions of the late eighteenth century. All were attempts to deal with the collapse of feudal social relations and the emergence of industrial society with its attendant social problems. Heywood (2017: 15) notes that conservatives sought to defend the status quo and resist radical change, liberals promoted individualism, free markets and a small state, while socialists looked towards a new society rooted in cooperation and community. In Mannheim's terms, conservatism was the ideology of the embattled aristocracy, liberalism the ideology of rising capitalist groups, and socialism an emergent ideology of the rapidly growing working classes.

The divisions between these groups were primarily economic, based on their approach to the creation and distribution of socially created wealth. Groups on the left conventionally favour equality and community, are optimistic about the possibility of managed progress (hence are often called 'progressives') and are prepared to use the resources of the state to achieve their goals. Those on the right value order and stability, are suspicious of ideas of a mutable human nature and view free markets as preferable to state intervention, at least in terms of the economy. This ideological positioning is the basis of the left/right distinction in politics, which continues today, albeit in modified form. With the emergence of the ideologies of communism and fascism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a linear political spectrum can be drawn (figure 20.1). Because twentieth-century communist and fascist regimes developed into brutal authoritarian regimes, some prefer to see the spectrum as a circle or horseshoe shape which brings the far left and far right closer together.

This scheme does not exhaust the ideological variety in society, as anarchism and nationalism, for example, also have long histories. Neither does it do justice to the internal differences within the basic positions. For example, there have been many varieties of socialism which bear a family resemblance to one another, but which are also different in crucial respects. These include Christian socialism, utopian socialism, democratic socialism, social democracy and eco-socialism. The left–right linear spectrum helps us to make sense of internal party divisions. For instance, the relatively left-wing Jeremy Corbyn became leader of the British Labour Party in 2015, following a disastrous general election defeat that large sections of the membership saw as the result of the party having drifted too far to the right. Many established Labour MPs were already further to the right of Corbyn's position and therefore found themselves at odds with the new policy direction he wanted to take, resulting in major disagreements. Similar left–right divisions exist within most political parties.

Figure 20.1 The linear political spectrum

Source: Heywood (2017: 15).

Since the 1960s, several ideologies have risen to prominence that are less easily located on the left–right spectrum. Arguably, the most important of these are feminism, environmentalism and various religious fundamentalisms with overtly political aims and programmes. Whether these should all be described as 'new' is arguable, as older forms can certainly be identified. Nonetheless, they are seen as having more impact in the current period.

Twenty-first-century populism

One political ideology that has undergone a significant resurgence in the twenty-first century is populism, usually linked to forms of nationalism and hence is often referred to as 'national populism'. Yet there is still disagreement on how to define populism. This is partly because populism is a label applied to others rather than one adopted

by 'populists' themselves. And it is a label with negative connotations, used to attack political opponents.

Most scholars argue that populism is not a fully formed political ideology complete with major figures, key texts and manifestos. Instead, it is a looser, 'thin-centred ideology' that attaches to other ideologies such as nationalism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017: 2–6). Tormey (2019) suggests that populism is more like a *style of politics* that presents society's main conflict as that between 'the people' (good) and the elites (bad). This can be seen in President Trump's pitching of the suffering workers against the incompetent US political establishment. It is also evident in the UK Brexit campaign's 'Let's Take Back Control' slogan, targeting a corrupt, Brussels-based EU establishment that 'the people' needed to shake off. Sociologically, the concept of 'the people' is too vague to be useful, but politically it may be a strength, as it is open to framing and reframing to take in different social groups (Mudde and Kalwasser 2017: 9). Müller (2017: 3) argues that, 'Put simply, populists do not claim "We are the 99 per cent." What they imply instead is "We are the 100 per cent."'

Populists also argue that there is some crisis that cannot be solved by the corrupt and/or incompetent political establishment and, rather than focusing on detailed policy, offer some sort of redemptive vision rooted in 'saving the nation' or 'freeing the people'. In Western Europe, contemporary populists in the Netherlands, France, Italy and Germany have framed the 'crisis' as one of preserving their national identities in the face of the free movement of people, rapid inward migration from Eastern Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and a supposed 'Islamization' of the West. This is often manifested in expressions of opposition to multiculturalism as state policy and cultural pluralism more generally. Undoubtedly, at the extremes, some of this opposition comes from a position of xenophobia and racism, though the concept of 'the people' offers the possibility to draw support from a wide range of political opinion.

Finally, populism is often, though not always, focused on a charismatic leader thought to have exceptional leadership skills, who uses 'plain' language and embraces direct confrontation with establishment figures. Trump's willingness to throw accusations of 'fake news' at news

outlets and individual reporters, and his outspoken comments about Mexican immigrants – 'They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists. And some, I assume, are good people' – are typical examples (Hughey 2017: 127). However, there are many others, among them President Duterte of the Phillippines, elected in 2016, whose crackdown on drug dealers and criminals involved threats to kill them all and an admission that he had previously taken part in extrajudicial murder. Such 'impolite' or intolerant language is not usual in political discourse, but does appeal to some of those who have become disillusioned with formal politics and the seemingly widening gap between the attitudes and lifestyles of metropolitan political and economic elites and social groups whose lives are geographically, economically and culturally very different.

The obvious question is why has national populism grown in strength and electoral success during this century? One equally obvious answer is that the current national populism in Europe and North America is driven by the anger of mainly white, working-class groups who feel left behind and effectively disenfranchised. Eatwell and Goodwin (2018) note that, in advance of the UK's EU referendum in 2016, one survey found that almost half of workers felt 'people like them' were not represented in politics and they had 'no voice in the national conversation', and 'more than half of white Americans without degrees felt that Washington did not reperesent people like them.' Clearly, such perceptions play a part in support for populist political movements. Yet this is far from an adequate explanation.

Trust in politicians and political systems have been severely eroded over recent decades, with the UK MPs' expenses scandal of 2009 (discussed in the next section) being perhaps the touchstone example of political wrongdoing and the failure of politicians, on the left, right and centre, to understand the lives of many working people on average incomes. For supporters, the leave campaign in the UK's EU referendum was not anti-democratic but rooted in the promise of *more* and *better* democratic representation once decision-making reverts to nation-state level.

Similarly, many of the issues that energize supporters are more nuanced and widely shared than populist leaders' rhetoric would

suggest. Growing inequality and a widening gap between rich and poor, the ability of public services to cope with rapid, large-scale immigration, worries about the impact and direction of continuing globalization and whether a policy of multiculturalism will negatively affect social solidarity are all matters that concern people across the political spectrum and certainly are not restricted to 'angry white men' (Eatwell and Goodwin 2018). Instead, national populism, like other political ideologies, holds appeal for a broad range of social groups, and it seems likely to survive beyond the current crop of charismatic leaders.

Ideologies in development

In broader terms, there are several reasons why the range of new ideological perspectives have risen to prominence since the late twentieth century. First, as industrial societies have moved into a post-industrial stage, the economic basis of established ideologies has been eroded and a series of 'new' social movements (discussed later) have emerged, whose basis lies in culture and identity every bit as much as wealth creation and distribution. For example, feminist ideology focuses on gender equality, taking in equal pay, childcare and breaking the corporate 'glass ceiling', but it also promotes 'woman' as a fundamental identity and challenges the 'pornification' of images of women and girls in the mass media. Feminism today has also brought to light the sexual harassment of women by men, most prominently seen in the #MeToo movement, which can be traced back to 2006, when Tarana Burke coined the term alongside her non-profit organization which supported victims of sexual abuse and harassment (Nicolaou and Smith 2019). From 2017, #MeToo spread rapidly, as numerous allegations were made against the film producer Harvey Weinstein (Boyle 2019: 1–2). In February 2020, Weinstein was finally jailed for twenty-three years. Similarly, environmentalist ideology contains a swingeing critique of capitalist economics and its ethos of continual economic growth, but it also promotes the welfare and rights of animals and localism as an alternative to untrammelled globalization.

Second, since the collapse of a discredited Soviet communism in the early 1990s and a rapid process of globalization, socialist and

communist ideologies have lost ground. Contemporary anti-globalization and anti-capitalist movements may share some similarities with the socialist critique of capitalism, but they do not necessarily accept the socialist/communist alternative either. This erosion of socialism as the 'natural' alternative to capitalism has had profound effects on social movements and political ideologies that are not yet fully understood.

Third, globalization has brought different societies and cultures into contact with one another in more systematic ways. As Western cultural products, tourists and values have spread around the world and migration from developing into developed countries has increased, there has been a reaction against the perceived decadence and moral decline of modern societies from fundamentalist religious groups whose ideologies are rooted in particular interpretations of religious texts. The most visible of these has been the Wahhabi/Salafist fundamentalism associated with a range of terrorist groups, including the Taliban in Afghanistan, al-Qaeda and, most recently, Islamic State (IS)/*Daesh*, which tried to create a worldwide 'caliphate'. There are also Christian fundamentalists, especially in the USA, who base their beliefs on a specific reading of the Bible and reject evolutionary theories of life on Earth. They are opposed to aspects of modern life, such as homosexuality and abortion, and have carried out violent attacks on family planning clinics.

There is one final point to note. Karl Mannheim (2003 [1936]) argued that ideologies do not exist in isolation but change and develop in relation to one another. At any given time the shape of the ideological landscape and the content of particular ideologies is partly determined by the relations between social movements and their ideologies. A good example is the long-established socialist ideology, which took on board the issue of gender equality from feminism and a concern for the impact of industry on the planet from environmentalism. In the process, socialist ideology was modified and expanded. Most other ideologies are engaged in a similar, dynamic process of accommodation, assimilation and change.

The actor Rose McGowan, speaking here outside the New York court where Harvey Weinstein was on trial, was one of the first to make public his sexual abuse of women in the film industry. She became a leading figure in the #MeToo movement.

Today the concept of ideology is not as widely used in sociology as it was before the 1990s. It is just as likely that sociologists with an interest in the power of ideas will draw on the Foucauldian concept of discourses and their effects, which has shifted the focus away from ideas and beliefs towards language, speech and documentary sources. 'Ideology' has historically been associated with Marxism, but, with the collapse of Soviet communism and the apparent triumph of neo-liberal capitalism since the 1980s, the concept lost ground. However, it is also the case that, since the 1970s, scholars have regularly claimed that we are approaching or are at the 'end of ideology'. Yet, the concept has repeatedly bounced back with each rising social movement, and it remains a useful tool for political sociologists interested in the way that political ideas are brought together into coherent structured belief systems.

[Democratization and global governance](#)

Since the 1980s, one political development stands out: the democratization of many of the world's societies. Since then, countries in Latin America, such as Chile, Bolivia and Argentina, have undergone the transition from authoritarian military rule to thriving democracy. Similarly, with the collapse of the communist bloc, many Eastern European states – Russia, Poland and Czechoslovakia, for example – became democratic. And in Africa, a number of previously undemocratic nations, including Benin, Ghana, Mozambique and South Africa, have come to embrace democratic ideals.

In the mid-1970s, more than two-thirds of all societies in the world could be considered authoritarian. Since that time, the situation has shifted markedly, and now fewer than one-third are authoritarian in nature. Democracy is no longer concentrated primarily in Western countries but is endorsed, at least in principle, as the desired form of government in most areas of the world. As the 'Arab Spring' of 2010–12 demonstrated, the desire for democracy and mass political participation has become perhaps the main standard of political legitimacy in the twenty-first century. The Arab Spring protesters across Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria and other countries in the Middle East and North Africa called for political freedom, democracy, economic development, poverty reduction and an end to corruption. Long-established regimes crumbled, taking many by surprise – President Mubarak in Egypt, President Ben Ali in Tunisia and Muammar Gaddafi in Libya were among those that were removed.

But the response of the regime in Syria led to a long and destructive civil war, there were rival administrations, an armed conflict and civil war in Libya, while, in Bahrain, Algeria and Yemen, authorities clamped down hard on protests. Syria became a battleground for several rival groups seeking to overthrow President Assad's authoritarian regime, and the conflict has led to at least 400,000 deaths and around 5.6 million people fleeing the country, as well as 6 million displaced internally (Council on Foreign Relations 2020b). But with the

assistance of Iran, and with Russian airpower, the Assad regime held on to power.

In this section we will consider the global spread of democracy and look at some explanations for the popularity of democratic systems, before moving on to examine some of the main problems faced by democracies today.

The fall of communism

The 100 years following Marx's death in 1883 seemed to bear out his prognosis of the spread of socialism and workers' revolutions around the globe. For much of the twentieth century, a large proportion of the world's population, mainly in the Soviet Union, China and Eastern Europe, lived under political systems that were communist or socialist in orientation. For example, they eschewed private ownership of productive enterprise and expressed an ideological commitment to equality. Communist states regarded themselves as democratic, although their systems did not operate under liberal democratic principles. Communism was essentially a system of one-party rule. Voters could choose only between different candidates of the same party – the Communist Party, which was easily the most dominant power in Soviet-style societies, controlling not just the political system but the economy as well.

Almost everyone in the West believed that communist systems were deeply entrenched and had become a permanent feature of global politics. Very few predicted the dramatic course of events that began to unfold in 1989 as one communist regime after another collapsed in a series of 'velvet revolutions'. What had seemed like a solid and established system of rule throughout Eastern Europe was rapidly overthrown.

Communists lost power in an accelerating sequence in countries they had dominated for half a century: Hungary, Poland, Bulgaria, East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Romania. Eventually, the Communist Party within the Soviet Union itself lost control. When the fifteen constituent republics of the USSR declared their independence in 1990–91, Mikhail Gorbachev, the last Soviet leader, was rendered a

'president without a state'. Even in China, students and others protesting in Tiananmen Square in 1989 seemed to shake the Communist Party's grip on power until they were brutally dispersed by the army.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, processes of democratization have continued to spread, and signs of democratization can be detected even among some of the world's most authoritarian states. Afghanistan was controlled by the Soviet Union after the latter's troops invaded in 1979. But the USSR's occupation ended ten years later following fierce resistance from the mujahidin (Muslim guerrilla warriors). During the early 1990s the country was the site of in-fighting between warlords composed of mujahidin factions. By 1996 the Taliban had seized control of most of the country and began the creation of a 'pure Islamic state'. They introduced an extreme interpretation of Islamic law, brought in public executions and amputations, forbade girls from going to school and women from working, and banned all 'frivolous' entertainment.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

20.1 Politics at the 'end of history'?

One scholar who theorized the triumph of capitalist democracy in the Cold War – and thus the 'end of history' – is Francis Fukuyama (1992). In the wake of the revolutions in Eastern Europe, the dissolution of the Soviet Union and a movement towards multiparty democracy, Fukuyama argued that the ideological battle was over. The end of history is the end of alternatives. No one any longer defends monarchism, fascism is a phenomenon of the past, as is communism, which had long been the major rival of Western democracy. Capitalism has won in its long struggle with socialism/communism, contrary to Marx's prediction, and liberal democracy stands unchallenged. We have reached, Fukuyama asserted, the end point of mankind's ideological evolution.

Fukuyama's thesis provoked outrage and much criticism. It smacked of triumphalism and was based primarily on the post-Cold War situation rather than genuine comparative historical research. It also closed off any possible future developments. It is at least theoretically feasible that a global economic crisis, nuclear conflict or natural catastrophe could undermine democratic politics and lead to more authoritarian systems of government.

And yet it is clear that Fukuyama did highlight a key phenomenon of our time. The uprisings in countries of the Middle East and North Africa in 2010–12 tend to support his argument that democratic political systems provide a standard by which non-democratic systems are assessed and found wanting. Long before the so-called Arab Spring, Fukuyama (1992: xiii) saw the weakness of authoritarian regimes:

The most remarkable development of the last quarter of the twentieth century has been the revelation of enormous weaknesses at the core of the world's seemingly strong dictatorships … From Latin America to Eastern Europe, from the Soviet Union to the Middle East and Asia, strong governments have been failing over the last two decades. And while they have not given way in all cases to stable liberal democracies, liberal democracy remains the only coherent political aspiration that spans different regions and cultures around the globe.

But why do people pursue democracy at great risk to themselves? Fukuyama suggests that democracy gives ordinary people something they crave: simply, recognition. Rather than being passive recipients, people are turned into active citizens capable of having their say in how nation-states behave. Such a basic demand should not be underestimated. Yet it seems doubtful that history has come to an end in the sense that all alternatives have been exhausted. Who can say what new forms of economic, political or cultural order may emerge in the future? Just as the thinkers of medieval times had no inkling of the industrial society that emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, so we cannot anticipate with any certainty what may change over the coming century.

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THINKING CRITICALLY

Are the critics right, and Fukuyama wrong? Provide evidence that might demonstrate the ideological battles around capitalism, communism and socialism have actually resurfaced since the 2008 financial crisis.

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Demolishing the Berlin Wall separating East and West Germany in 1989 was a key symbol marking the end of Soviet communism.

In 2001 the USA led efforts which toppled the Taliban and in June 2002 Hamid Karzai became president and set about gaining approval for a new constitution. This was signed in January 2004 and provided for a strong executive branch, a moderate role for Islam and basic protections for human rights. The first elections in Afghanistan were held in October, resulting in Karzai winning a five-year mandate as president. But by 2007 the Taliban had regrouped and attacked US and other foreign troops and Afghan government officials, and it still retains control in parts of the country. A new president, Ashraf Ghani, was elected in 2014, marking the first ever democratic transfer of power.

Only in 2015 did Taliban leaders agree to meaningful peace talks, which continued fitfully until an agreement was reached between the USA and Taliban in 2020 for the withdrawal of US troops on condition that the Taliban participate in peace talks with the Afghan government (BBC News 2020c). Hence, progress has been made in the direction of

democracy in Afghanistan, but building a peaceful relationship between government and the Taliban will be key to further democratization.

In China, which contains about a fifth of the world's population, the communist government faces pressure to become more democratic. Although thousands of people remain in prison in China for the non-violent expression of their desire for democracy, there are still groups, resisted by the government, working actively to secure a transition to a democratic system. In 2019, Hong Kong – a British colony that was 'returned' to China in 1997 under a 'one country, two systems' arrangement – saw large-scale unrest after plans to introduce extradition to China were announced. And though the bill to legislate for this was eventually withdrawn, people continued to take to the streets demanding full democracy for Hong Kong. The Chinese president, Xi Jinping, responded by ordering mass arrests of movement activists and journalists, the disqualification from elections of pro-democracy politicians, and a promise to pursue overseas citizens who 'intervene' in Hong Kong's affairs (Shine 2020). Hong Kong has its own legal system, and its Basic Law grants freedom of speech and assembly, but this law expires in 2047. Given the repressive intervention in 2020, concerns about China's post-2047 response appear already to have been superseded by events.

In recent years, other authoritarian Asian states, such as Myanmar, Indonesia and Malaysia, have also seen growing democratic movements, some of which have been met with violent repressive responses. This demonstrates that the global trend towards democracy is not inevitable, and in established democratic countries there is evidence of rising discontent.

Democracy and its discontents

Why has democracy become so widespread? One explanation is that other types of political rule have been attempted and failed. It may seem clear that democracy is a 'better' form of political organization than authoritarianism, but this alone does not adequately explain the recent democratizing wave. While a full explanation requires detailed

analysis of the social and political situations in each country, there can be little doubt that globalizing processes have played an important role.

First, the growing number of cross-national cultural contacts has invigorated democratic movements. The global media, along with advances in communications technology, have exposed inhabitants of non-democratic nations to democratic ideals, increasing internal pressure on political elites to hold elections. Of course, such pressure does not automatically result from the diffusion of the notion of popular sovereignty. More important is that, with globalization, news of democratic revolutions and accounts of the mobilizing processes that lead to them are quickly spread on a regional level.

Second, international organizations such as the United Nations and the European Union have put external pressure on non-democratic states to move in democratic directions. In some cases, these organizations have been able to use trade embargoes, conditional provision of loans for economic development, and diplomatic manoeuvres of various kinds to encourage the dismantling of authoritarian regimes. For example, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and UN Mission in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) supported a new Independent Electoral Commission to monitor and administer the 2006 national election, in which there was an 80 per cent participation rate. This was a real achievement in a society that had experienced around 4 million deaths as a result of civil war and had not held elections for forty years. UNDP has focused particularly on improving the participation rates of women in elections, both as voters and as candidates, in, for example, Kuwait, Morocco and Mauritania (UNDP 2007).

Third, democratization has been facilitated by the expansion of capitalism. Although transnational corporations are notorious for striking deals with dictators, corporations generally prefer to do business in democratic states – not because they value freedom and equality, but because democracies are generally more stable, and stability is essential for maximizing profits. Because elites are often anxious to increase levels of international trade and encourage transnationals to set up in their countries, they have sometimes

pursued a democratic agenda of their own – in what Barrington Moore (1966) once called 'revolutions from above'.

If globalization was the sole cause of the most recent wave of democratization, it is true that all countries today would be democratic. The persistence of authoritarian regimes in such countries as China, Cuba, Vietnam and elsewhere suggests that globalizing forces are not always sufficient to force a transition to liberal democracy. But democratic movements exist in many of these countries, leading some sociologists to argue that many more nations will become democratic in the years to come.

Democracies in trouble?

Between 1974 and 2000, largely the result of newly independent, formerly colonized countries introducing democratic systems, the proportion of democracies to non-democracies in the world increased from 27 per cent to 62 per cent (Linz 2000). Yet the apparently inexorable expansion of democracy across the world seems to have stalled in recent years, and established democracies face voter apathy and political corruption.

In 2005, an assessment by the influential US-based NGO Freedom House found 123 'electoral democracies' in the world, the highest number ever. But by 2010 this had fallen back to the 1995 level, at 115 countries. The Philippines, Tanzania and Tonga were among those with the status of electoral democracy as a result of recent elections, but others, such as Burundi, Guinea-Bissau and Haiti, were removed from the classification because of intimidation, corruption, pre-election misuse of state resources and persecution of opposition candidates (Puddington 2011). Even in countries with long-established democratic systems, democracy is not universally valued amid increasing evidence of voter apathy and a widespread mistrust of elected politicians.

Are democracies in crisis or is all such talk overblown? Przeworski (2019: 15) argues that the fear many people express about the future of democracy is not of some acute crisis but of chronic and damaging erosion: 'The spectre that haunts us today … is a gradual, almost imperceptible erosion of democratic institutions and norms, subversion

of democracy by stealth.' One perceptible sign of possible disaffection with established democratic institutions is the gradual reduction in voter turnout in elections.

European parliamentary elections since 1979 are a case in point. The average turnout across the EU fell from around 62 per cent in 1979 to just 42.6 per cent by 2014, though there is a qualification here. In 1979, just nine countries participated, while in 2014 there were twenty-eight, including some in Eastern Europe which recorded spectacularly low turnouts. This skews the average downwards (European Parliament 2014). In 2019, turnout rose to just over 50 per cent, but it was still well below participation rates up to the mid-1990s (European Parliament 2020). However, most of the long-established member states, among them Germany, France, Italy and the Netherlands, also saw turnout fall dramatically over the period. In the traditionally more Eurosceptic UK, turnout struggled to get above one-third at any time (see table 20.1).

In a regional authority such as the European Parliament we might expect turnout to be lower than in national elections, as the parliament often appears more remote. Yet, as the experience of the UK shows, voter turnout has been falling at the national level too, particularly since the early 1990s (see table 20.2). From a peak of over 80 per cent in the early 1950s, it fell below 60 per cent in 2001 before a modest recovery in 2005 and 2010. In the 2019 election, widely presented as a crucial 'Brexit election', given the failure of MPs to act decisively on the 2016 EU referendum vote to leave, turnout was actually marginally down on 2017 (Audickas et al. 2020: 25). There does appear to be a generational shift driving this reduced turnout. In the 2015 election, around 78 per cent of those over sixty-five and 77 per cent of those aged fifty-five to sixty-four voted, compared with just 43 per cent of those aged eighteen to twenty-four (Ipsos MORI 2015). Such apathy stands in stark contrast to the enthusiasm displayed by voters in more recently created democracies.

Table 20.1 Turnout in European Parliament elections, by member state, 1979–2019

Notes: *Compulsory voting. In Italy, voting was also compulsory for the 1979, 1984 and 1989 elections; Cyprus abolished mandatory voting in 2017.

Source: European Parliament (2020).

Country	1979	1981	1984	1987	1989	1994	1995	1996	1999	2004	2007	2009	2013	2014	2019
Belgium*	91.36		92.09		90.73	90.66			91.05	90.81		90.39		89.64	88.47
Denmark	47.82		52.38		46.17	52.92			50.46	47.89		59.54		56.32	66.08
Germany	65.73		56.76		62.28	60.02			45.19	43.00		43.27		48.10	61.38
Ireland	63.61		47.56		68.28	43.98			50.21	58.58		58.64		52.44	49.70
France	60.71		56.72		48.80	52.71			46.76	42.76		40.63		42.43	50.12
Italy	85.65		83.47		81.07	73.60			69.76	71.72		66.47		57.22	54.50
Luxembourg*	88.91		88.79		87.39	88.55			87.27	91.35		90.76		85.55	84.24
Netherlands	58.12		50.88		47.48	35.69			30.02	39.26		36.75		37.32	41.93
United Kingdom	32.35		32.57		36.37	36.43			24.00	38.52		34.70		35.60	37.18
Greece*		81.48	80.59		80.03	73.18			70.25	63.22		52.54		59.97	58.69
Spain				68.52	54.71	59.14			63.05	45.14		44.87		43.81	60.73
Portugal				72.42	51.10	35.54			39.93	38.60		36.77		33.67	30.75
Sweden							41.63		38.84	37.85		45.53		51.07	55.27
Austria								67.73	49.40	42.43		45.97		45.39	59.80
Finland								57.60	30.14	39.43		38.60		39.10	40.80
Czechia										28.30		28.22		18.20	28.72
Estonia										26.83		43.90		36.52	37.60
Cyprus*										72.50		59.40		43.97	44.99
Lithuania										48.38		20.98		47.35	53.48
Latvia										41.34		53.70		30.24	33.53
Hungary										38.50		36.31		28.97	43.36
Malta										82.39		78.79		74.80	72.70
Poland										20.87		24.53		23.83	45.68
Slovenia										28.35		28.37		24.55	28.89
Slovakia										16.97		19.64		13.05	22.74
Bulgaria											29.22	38.99		35.84	32.64
Romania											29.47	27.67		32.44	51.20
Croatia													20.84	25.24	29.85
Total EU	61.99		58.98		58.41	56.67			49.51	45.47		42.97		42.61	50.66

Table 20.2 Voter turnout in UK general elections, 1918–2019

Note: 1918 figures include Ireland.

Source: Audickas et al. (2020: 25).

		England	Wales	Scotland	Northern Ireland	United Kingdom
1918		55.7%	65.9%	55.1%	89.5%	57.2%
1922		72.8%	79.1%	70.4%	77.2%	73.0%
1923		71.1%	77.3%	67.9%	76.5%	71.1%
1924		77.4%	80.0%	75.1%	66.7%	77.0%
1929		76.6%	82.1%	73.5%	53.8%	76.3%
1931		76.1%	79.3%	77.4%	74.5%	76.4%
1935		70.7%	76.4%	72.6%	72.0%	71.1%
1945		73.4%	75.7%	69.0%	67.4%	72.8%
1950		84.1%	84.8%	80.9%	77.4%	83.9%
1951		82.7%	84.4%	81.2%	79.9%	82.6%
1955		76.9%	79.6%	75.1%	74.1%	76.8%
1959		78.9%	82.6%	78.1%	65.9%	78.7%
1964		77.0%	80.1%	77.6%	71.7%	77.1%
1966		75.9%	79.0%	76.0%	66.1%	75.8%
1970		71.4%	77.4%	74.1%	76.6%	72.0%
1974	Feb	79.0%	80.0%	79.0%	69.9%	78.8%
1974	Oct	72.6%	76.6%	74.8%	67.7%	72.8%
1979		75.9%	79.4%	76.8%	67.7%	76.0%
1983		72.5%	76.1%	72.7%	72.9%	72.7%
1987		75.4%	78.9%	75.1%	67.0%	75.3%
1992		78.0%	79.7%	75.5%	69.8%	77.7%
1997		71.4%	73.8%	71.3%	67.1%	71.4%
2001		59.2%	61.6%	58.2%	68.0%	59.4%
2005		61.3%	62.6%	60.8%	62.9%	61.4%
2010		65.5%	64.8%	63.8%	57.6%	65.1%
2015		66.0%	65.7%	71.0%	58.1%	66.2%
2017		69.1%	68.6%	66.4%	65.4%	68.8%
2019		67.5%	66.6%	68.1%	61.8%	67.3%

The global picture of voter turnout is varied, though there has been a general global decline since the mid-1980s. It has been suggested that the type of voting system adopted may explain the variety at the national level (see table 20.3). For example, it may be that election

turnout is highest in those countries with compulsory voting and lowest where voting is entirely voluntary. This seems to be an effective argument in parts of Europe. Lichtenstein's average turnout of almost 93 per cent since 1945 can be attributed partly to that country's compulsory voting system, whereas Switzerland, which has a voluntary system, has a low average of just 56.5 per cent. This cannot be the complete explanation of cross-national voting patterns, though, as the Bahamas has averaged a turnout of close to 92 per cent since 1945 in a *non-compulsory* system. Clearly there must be other factors at work as well.

Table 20.3 Vote/registration ratio league table, by world region, selected countries: ranking of average turnout, 1945–2001 (percentages)

Note: Number of elections in parentheses.

Source: Selected data from Pintor and Gratschew (2002).

Oceania		Central and South America	
Australia (22)	94.5	Guyana (7)	88.5
New Zealand (19)	90.8	Chile (11)	78.9
Fiji (3)	81.0	Nicaragua (6)	75.9
Tonga (4)	56.3	Colombia (18)	47.5
Average	**83.1**	**Average**	**71.5**
Western Europe		Asia	
Liechtenstein (17)	92.8	Singapore (8)	93.5
Sweden (17)	87.1	Japan (22)	69.5
United Kingdom (16)	75.2	India (13)	59.4
Switzerland (14)	56.6	Pakistan (6)	45.3
Average	**82.6**	**Average**	**74.0**
North America		Middle East	
Bahamas (6)	91.9	Israel (15)	80.3
Canada (19)	73.9	Iran (1)	77.3
United States of America (17)	66.5	Jordan (3)	51.8
Haiti (3)	47.1	Lebanon (3)	39.5
Average	**69.6**	**Average**	**72.2**
Africa		Central and Eastern Europe	
Burundi (1)	91.4	Uzbekistan (3)	93.5
Morocco (5)	71.2	Czech Republic (4)	82.8
Zimbabwe (3)	48.7	Russia (3)	58.4
Mali (2)	21.3	Poland (5)	50.3
Average	**64.5**	**Average**	**71.9**

Comparative statistics on voter turnout tell us very little about the state of democracy *within* countries. What is not revealed in such bald figures are the different national contexts within which the turnout

figures were achieved. This is a pertinent point when comparisons are made between the 'new' and 'old' democracies, which are often very different political environments. For example, in many established democracies, such as the USA, there are other means through which people's interests can be represented, such as in the courts under equal rights legislation (Pintor and Gratschew 2002), which may partly explain low turnout in elections.

So, although turnout gives us a basic guide to the proportions of people voting in elections across the world, it may be more informative to look at the changing voting patterns over time within particular national contexts, as in our UK example in <u>table 20.2</u> above. Addressing the important question of *why* people do or do not vote requires statistical evidence to be related to the societal context within which politics takes place.

The 2014 national independence referendum in Scotland engaged large numbers of people, with voter turnout on the day of 84.6 per cent, the highest since universal suffrage was introduced. Yet in the 2011 Scottish parliamentary election, turnout was just 50.6 per cent (Denver 2011: 1).

Some have argued that people are increasingly sceptical of all established forms of authority, as there has been a shift in political values in democratic nations from 'scarcity values' to 'post-material values' (Inglehart 1997). This means that, after a certain level of economic prosperity has been reached, voters become concerned less with economic issues than with the quality of their individual (as opposed to collective) lifestyles. As a result, voters are generally less interested in national politics, except for issues involving personal liberty.

However, Onora O'Neill (2002: 9) argues that we are living through a crisis of trust in Western political leaders and other authorities:

Mistrust and suspicion have spread across all areas of life, and supposedly with good reason. Citizens, it is said, no longer trust governments, or politicians, or ministers, or the police, or the courts, or the prison service. Consumers, it is said, no longer trust business, especially big business, or their products. None of us, it is said, trusts banks, or insurers, or pension providers. Patients, it is said, no longer trust doctors ... and in particular no longer trust hospitals or hospital consultants. 'Loss of trust' is, in short, a cliché of our times.

Many scholars and political commentators point out that formal politics is one sphere of society which shows in a particularly stark form how trust has ebbed away from previously respected sources of authority. Quandt et al. (2015: 1) note that, 'When asked, many citizens state that politicians do not listen to what 'the people' say, causing some to turn away from politics in frustration. Others voice their opinion in the streets, protesting against political decisions, thus demonstrating that they want to have their say.' Both aspects were seen in the wake of the UK vote to leave the EU. The protracted parliamentary process aimed at reaching a comprehensive UK/EU deal left many 'leave' voters disillusioned and was one factor in the convincing national election win for Boris Johnson's Conservative Party. Johnson was the most prominent figure in the 2016 leave campaign and his pledge to 'Get Brexit Done' proved to be decisive in winning longstanding Labour-held constituencies.

Survey evidence seems to confirm the erosion of trust in politicians and formal party politics, highlighted by political attempts to tackle the financial crisis in the eurozone economies and bring down national debt. In 2011 a *Guardian*/ICM opinion survey of five EU countries – Poland, the UK, France, Germany and Spain – asked people if they trusted politicians to 'act with honesty and integrity'. Overall, just 9 per cent said they did trust politicians to act this way – 12 per cent in the UK, 10 per cent in Germany, 11 per cent in France, 8 per cent in Spain and just 3 per cent in Poland. The poll also asked whether people trusted their government 'to deal with the country's problems'. Overall, 78 per cent said they did *not* trust their government – 66 per cent in the

UK, 80 per cent in Germany, 82 per cent in France, 78 per cent in Spain and 82 per cent in Poland (Glover 2011).

The growing rift between what is increasingly described as the democratically elected 'political class' or 'elite' and the citizens they serve was dramatically symbolized in the 2009 expenses scandal involving members of the UK Parliament. The *Daily Telegraph* newspaper began publishing leaked details of the expense claims of Members of Parliament, which further damaged trust in politicians. MPs are allowed to claim expenses to cover travel from constituencies, the cost of staff, necessary accommodation in London, and other legitimate expenses associated with their role. But there was public outrage at the use of public funds on a wide variety of small personal items (such as chocolate bars or DVDs) to large ones (such as plasma televisions, mortgages and inflated housing costs). Attempts by some MPs to exempt their expenses from the Freedom of Information Act (2000) were also seen as a disreputable bid to cover up wrongdoing.

The expenses system was changed in the wake of the scandal, and there is some polling evidence that public opinion on 'confidence in the operation of Parliament' returned to pre-scandal levels quite quickly (Bartle and Allen 2010: 132–3). Nevertheless, attitudes towards politicians have probably never been less favourable. Across the European Union mass public protests took place against corrupt and ineffectual politicians and their post-2008 austerity plans in Greece, Italy, Ireland, Portugal and the UK.

In the next section, we take a look at the changing situation of the nation-state, which some see as incapable of maintaining its pre-eminent political position in our global age. This may be yet one more reason why democratic participation seems less vital to younger generations.

Global governance: prospects and reality

The American sociologist Daniel Bell (1987) observed that national government is *too small* to respond to the big questions – such as the influence of global economic competition or the destruction of the world's environment – but it is *too big* to deal with the small questions

– issues that affect particular cities or localities. The suggestion is that national politics is caught in a pincer movement of globalization and localization, which partly explains why many people, as we saw earlier, are just not enthused enough to participate.

National governments have little power over the activities of giant business corporations, the main actors within the global economy. Companies may move their production or headquarters abroad to enhance profitability or to be closer to emerging markets. Panasonic and Sony announced they were moving their headquarters from London to Amsterdam, in 2018 and 2019 respectively, while P&O Ferries moved its vessels' registrations to Cyprus, also in 2019. All three cited a desire to minimize business disruption or to avoid additional customs costs as the UK left the EU. Also in 2019, the British company Dyson surprised many by moving its headquarters to Singapore, despite its founder having campaigned for the UK to leave the EU in order to boost British manufacturing and business. Singapore provided Dyson with access to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and thereby growing markets for his products (electrical goods) as well as lower corporate tax rates (Cotton 2019). British workers who may stand to lose their jobs in such cases are likely to want the government to 'do something'. But national governments are unable to control globalizing processes. All they can do is try to soften the blow by providing unemployment benefits or job retraining.

Globalization has created new risks – the spread of weapons of mass destruction, international pollution, worldwide terrorism, the faster spread of pandemics across national boundaries, and truly global financial crises. These issues cannot be managed by nation-states alone, and international governmental organizations (IGOs) such as the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the United Nations have been created as a way of pooling global risks. These organizations form the basis for discussions about global governance. Global governance is not about creating government on a global level. Rather, it is concerned with the framework of rules needed to tackle global problems and the diverse set of institutions, including both international organizations and national governments, required to guarantee this framework of rules.

Many of the international or global organizations already in place to tackle these problems lack democratic accountability. For example, the UN Security Council has fifteen members, of which five are permanent – the USA, Britain, France, China and Russia – some of the world's most powerful countries. For any resolution to be passed, the council requires nine votes, including those of all five permanent members. The UN did not back a resolution explicitly allowing force against Iraq in 2003, for example, because France threatened to veto it. This was one of the main grounds cited by critics of the war, who condemned it as an illegitimate use of power. The views of the majority of the world's poorer countries were largely irrelevant in the debate.

As a positive example of regional cooperation and integration, the European Union has often been seen as a potential model for successful international politics and global governance. The expansion of the EU to twenty-eight nation-states integrated into a union of cooperation within an institutional and legal framework is often cited as a major achievement of post-war European politics. However, the union has also been criticized for its high levels of bureaucracy and lack of democratic accountability, which has been part of the ideological platform of European national populist parties. The historical roots of the EU lie in the Second World War, and the idea of European integration was conceived to prevent such destruction from happening again. The British wartime prime minister Winston Churchill called for a 'United States of Europe' in 1946, and practical moves towards European unity were proposed in a speech on 9 May 1950 by the then French foreign minister, Robert Schuman. This date is celebrated annually as 'Europe Day'. However, in 2020, the UK became the first state to leave the EU, reducing the union to twenty-seven countries – though, so far at least, there does not seem to be any evidence that other states will soon follow.

Global society 20.1 The European Union: successful pooling of sovereignty?

Initially, the EU consisted of just six countries: Belgium, Germany, France, Italy, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. Denmark, Ireland and the United Kingdom joined in 1973, Greece in 1981, Spain and Portugal in 1986, and Austria, Finland and Sweden in 1995. The biggest ever enlargement took place in 2004, when ten new countries joined: eight from Eastern Europe – the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and Slovakia – plus Cyprus and Malta. Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007 and Croatia in 2013, bringing the total to twenty-eight countries (European Commission 2015b).

In the early years, much of the cooperation between EU countries was about trade and the economy, but now the Union also deals with many other subjects of direct importance to daily life. EU agencies deal with areas as diverse as citizens' rights, security, job creation, regional development and environmental protection. In the UK referendum, the argument that membership of the EU undermines national sovereignty – the ability for self-government – was a crucial argument put forward by the successful Vote Leave campaign. However, others argue that the EU is merely another international body like the United Nations or the World Trade Organization (*The Economist* 2005).

Defenders of the EU see both these accounts as inaccurate. They argue that it is an organization whose member states have set up common institutions to which they delegate some of their power so that decisions on specific matters of joint interest can be made democratically at European level. All decisions and procedures are based on the treaties, which are agreed by all the member countries. This pooling of sovereignty is also called 'European integration'.

EU supporters argue that the Union has delivered half a century of stability, peace and prosperity, helped to raise living standards, built a single Europe-wide market, launched the single European

currency (the euro), and strengthened Europe's voice in the world. However, the sovereign debt crisis which began in 2009 not only raised issues of supranational governance but also led some to question seriously whether a pan-European currency can actually survive in the long term.

THINKING CRITICALLY

If nation-states generate strong national identities, will the EU have to replace these with a European identity if it is to be successful into the future? What does the evidence from voter turnout for national general elections and for the European Parliament tell us?

The economic crisis which engulfed the eurozone countries (those within the single European currency) pointedly called into question the suitability of the EU model for governance of the global economy (Della Salla 2011: 152). In particular, as McNamara (2010: 22) argues,

> At base, the problem is simple: the EU is an outlier in political and economic history, and markets do not know what to expect from its unique combination of a single currency and separate nation-states. The Eurozone crisis reveals the challenges of the EU's *sui generis* political status – no longer a mere collection of nation-states, yet not a fully-fledged federal entity.

The huge bailout packages agreed for Greece, Ireland and Portugal may look like good evidence of concerted, multinational political action. However, apart from a general consensus that a better system of financial regulation is now needed, there seems little political agreement on how the EU should develop its governance structures to prevent a repeat of the crisis. Some leaders see a desperate need for closer political (and fiscal) union, while others, notably those outside the single currency, view the crisis as evidence that closer integration is undesirable.

What, then, is the fate of democracy in an age when democratic governance at the nation-state level seems ill-equipped to deal with

events? Successive UK Conservative Party leaders and some economists suggest there is little to be done: governments cannot hope to control the rapid changes occurring around us, and the most prudent course is to reduce the role of government and allow market forces to guide the way. However, the global financial crisis has demonstrated that this is a potentially hazardous path. Bootle (2011: 3) argues that, 'From the events of 2007/9, it seems plain that the financial markets have *not* worked to promote the common weal, and they have caused, rather than absorbed, chaos and instability. Ironically, they have had to be bailed out by governments.'

Held (2004) maintains that, in a global age, we are in need of *more*, not less, governance. Yet effective governing demands a deepening of democracy, at the level of the nation-state, above it and below it. This means making global organizations accountable, in the same way that democratically elected governments are accountable to their electorate in national elections. The International Criminal Court, which prosecutes and brings to justice those responsible for genocide, crimes against humanity and war crimes, and the United Nations both provide good foundations. These institutions foster a vision of a world in which basic human rights are protected and a peaceful process for resolution of difference is agreed.

In Held's view, global social democracy will be achieved through multi-layered governance in which many organizations operate together at different levels: local, national and global. Where states were once the main actors in international politics, today these include administrative agencies, courts and legislatures. A former secretary-general of the UN, Kofi Annan, has been highly influential in inter national politics, for example. Non-governmental organizations, such as Oxfam and Amnesty International, as well as social movements, can also play an important role. Below, we look in more detail at the increasing significance of social movements and how sociologists have understood them.

Social movements: beyond formal politics

Political life, as our discussion above shows, is by no means carried on only within the orthodox framework of political parties, voting systems and governmental bodies. Despite the spread of democracy, the persistence of authoritarian regimes reminds us that effecting change within existing political structures is not always easy or possible. Sometimes change can be brought about only through recourse to non-orthodox forms of political action, such as revolutions and social movements.

What are social movements?

The most dramatic and far-reaching example of non-orthodox political action is revolution – the overthrow of an existing socio-political order by means of a mass movement, often involving violence. Revolutions are tense, exciting and fascinating events; understandably, they attract great attention. Yet, for all of their high drama, revolutions occur relatively infrequently.

See chapter 2, 'Asking and Answering Sociological Questions', for a discussion of Theda Skocpol's work on social revolutions.

The most common type of non-orthodox political activity is the social movement – a collective attempt to further common interests or secure common goals through action outside the sphere of established institutions. A variety of social movements have existed in modern societies, some enduring, some transient. While some carry on their activities within the laws of the society in which they exist, others operate as networks of illegal or underground groups. It is characteristic of *protest* movements, however, that they operate near

the margins of what is defined as legally permissible by governments at any particular time or place. Social movements often arise with the aim of bringing about change on a public issue, such as expanding civil rights for a segment of the population. In response, counter-movements sometimes emerge in defence of the status quo. The campaign for women's right to abortion, for example, has been vociferously challenged by anti-abortion, 'pro-life' activists, who argue that abortion should be illegal.

Often, laws or policies are altered as a result of the action of social movements. For example, it used to be illegal for groups of workers to call their members out on strike. As a result of the actions of trade unions, laws were amended, making the strike a permissible tactic of industrial conflict. Similarly, lesbian and gay movements have been largely successful in raising the issue of equal rights, and many countries around the world have equalized their laws on the legal age of sexual activity for heterosexuals and homosexuals.

The American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s succeeded in pushing through important pieces of legislation outlawing racial segregation in schools and public places. Since 2013, the emerging contemporary movement known as Black Lives Matter has continued to protest against the persistence of racism in society and police violence against African Americans (Lebron 2017). Feminist movements secured important gains for women in terms of economic and political equality, while environmental movements have campaigned in unconventional, direct ways to promote sustainable development and change attitudes towards the relationship between humans and nature.

See chapter 5, 'The Environment', for a much wider discussion of environmental issues.

Social movements are as evident a feature of the contemporary world as are the formal, bureaucratic organizations they often oppose, and

some scholars suggest that we may be moving towards a global 'social movement society' which provides fertile ground for this type of collective action. For this reason, we need to explore sociological theories of social movements.

Theorizing social movements

For most of the twentieth century, social movements were seen by sociologists as rather unusual phenomena. As with other forms of collective behaviour, such as riots, crowds and revolutions, they seemed to be marginal to the theoretical and methodological mainstream of the discipline (Tarrow 1998). This began to change from the 1960s with the emergence of a fresh wave of movements, which attracted a new generation of sociologists looking to understand and explain them. When they did so, they found the existing theories seemed inadequate for the task. To see why, we must take a brief tour through the field of social movement theories.

One of the many protests that burst out in June 2020 across cities in the USA and then internationally following the police murder of African-American George Floyd. The Black Lives Matter movement originally highlighted endemic violence against African Americans in the USA but has since spread to other countries.

Collective behaviour and social unrest

The Chicago School of sociology is often seen as the first systematically to chart forms of collective behaviour and, from the 1920s, to turn these into a specialist field of inquiry (Della Porta and Diani 2020). Scholars in the Chicago tradition, including Robert E. Park, Ernest W. Burgess and Herbert Blumer, saw social movements as *agents* of social change, not merely as *products* of it. In this sense, they began to theorize social movements in more productive ways.

Herbert Blumer was the foremost social movement analyst in the Chicago tradition of symbolic interactionism. He devised a theory of social unrest to account for the unconventional protest activities of social movements outside the sphere of formal party politics and interest representation. Essentially, he saw social movements of all

kinds as motivated by dissatisfaction with some aspects of current society, which they sought to rectify. In doing so, they were trying to build a 'new order of life'. Blumer (1969: 8) argued that

> The career of a social movement depicts the emergence of a new order of life. In its beginning, a social movement is amorphous, poorly organized, and without form; the collective behavior is on the primitive level…. As a social movement develops, it takes on the character of a society. It acquires organization and form, a body of customs and traditions, established leadership, an enduring division of labor, social rules and social values – in short, a culture, a social organization, and a new scheme of life.

Blumer's theory of social movements as social unrest makes some important points. He saw that movements can be 'active' or outwardly directed, aiming to transform society, or 'expressive' or inwardly directed, trying to change the people who become involved. An example of the former would be the labour movement, which aimed radically to change capitalist societies in egalitarian ways, while the latter would include 'New Age' movements, which encourage people to transform their inner selves. In practice, most social movements involve both active and expressive elements as activists and supporters undergo changes in their self-identity as a result of campaigns to change society. Veganism, for example, is aimed at promoting practical alternatives to the human use and abuse of animals, but it also generates an increasing identification with other animals, thus transforming people's perception of self.

Blumer also argued that social movements have a 'life cycle', involving four consecutive stages. First, there is 'social ferment', when people are agitated about an issue but are relatively unfocused and disorganized. This develops into a stage of 'popular excitement', during which the sources of dissatisfaction are more clearly defined and understood. In the third stage, formal organizations are normally created which bring about a higher level of coordination and a more effective campaigning structure. Finally comes 'institutionalization', in which the movement comes to be accepted as part of the wider society and political life. Of course, some movements partially succeed, while others completely fail. Some endure over quite long periods of time, while others simply

run out of finance or enthusiasm, thus ending their life cycle. This idea of a life cycle has proved to be extremely productive and has been central to many recent studies, particularly in the USA, which shows that Blumer's work continues to influence social movement studies (Goodwin and Jasper 2015).

One problem with this interactionist approach is that, although it treats movements as meaningful phenomena – a clear breakthrough at the time – its studies tend not to explore the rational decisions and strategies of movement activists. This aspect was left for later scholars to pursue. Second, although the approach produced some detailed case studies of particular movements, critics argued that these were largely descriptive accounts that did not pay enough attention to explanations that connected social movement activity to changes in the social structure (Della Porta and Diani 2020).

Classic studies 20.2 Neil Smelser on understanding social movements

The research problem

Social movements have become very common, and you may well be part of one or more. They often appear unannounced, taking sociologists by surprise, but they can also collapse in much the same way. Does this mean that their emergence is entirely random, the product of chance and unpredictable circumstances? How might they be linked to wider social changes? Can we develop a general theory of movement emergence and development that would help us to understand the process better? The sociologist Neil J.

Smelser worked with Talcott Parsons and studied collective behaviour from a structural functionalist perspective, aiming for just such a general theory of social movements.

Smelser's explanation

Smelser (1962) devised a theory of *structural strain* to account for the emergence of social movements, though one thing that marks out his perspective is that it amounts to a '[value-added model]'. This idea is taken from economic theory and suggests that social movements emerge through a process of identifiable stages, with each successive stage 'adding value'. The model sees each stage adding to the probability that collective behaviour or a social movement will be created. In this sense, Smelser's argument is multi-causal, rejecting all notions of a single cause. This was a very important moment in the study of social movements.

Smelser proposed six 'value-added' elements as necessary for a social movement to develop.

1. *Structural conduciveness* All social movements take place within a wider social context, and this structural context has to be conducive to movement formation. For example, in authoritarian societies there may be very little scope for people to gather together in large groups or to demonstrate legally

against things they oppose. Therefore, opponents of a regime have to find other, less open, ways to pursue change. The situation is not structurally conducive to social movement activity. In recent years, social movement scholars have used the concept of 'political opportunity structure' to describe the ways in which political systems create or deny opportunities for movements to develop (Tarrow 1998), and this concept clearly owes much to Smelser's earlier idea (Crossley 2002).

2. *Structural strain* If the social structure is conducive to collective behaviour, then there needs to be a strain between people's expectations and social reality. When people expect, or have been led to expect, certain things from society and these expectations are not met, frustrations arise and people look for other ways to meet them.

3. *Generalized beliefs* Smelser argues that, if the first two conditions are met, it is necessary for generalized beliefs about the causes of strain to develop and spread in order to convince people of the need to join or form a social movement. He sees such generalized beliefs as often quite primitive and based on wish fulfilment rather than being thought through rationally.

4. *Precipitating factors* These are essentially events that act as sparks to ignite the flame of protest action. A good example of this would be in the USA in 1955, when Rosa Parks was removed from a racially segregated bus, an action which triggered protests and became a key event in the black civil rights movement. Precipitating factors help to make social strains more immediately visible for potential supporters. Without them, the process of movement formation may be stalled for a long period.

5. *Mobilization for action* Having witnessed a precipitating event, the next element is effective communication via the formation of an active social network which allows activists to perform some of the functions necessary for successful protest and organization-building – writing and distributing pamphlets, organizing demonstrations, taking membership fees, and so on.

All of this activity requires a higher level of communication and social networking.

6. *Failure of social control* The final factor in Smelser's model is the response of the forces of social control. The response of authorities can be crucial in closing down an emergent social movement or creating opportunities for it to develop. Sometimes an over-reaction by authorities can encourage others to support the movement, especially in our mediadominated age. For example, the widespread media reports of heavy-handed treatment of Greenpeace activists aboard the *Greenpeace III* in 1972 served to create the impression of a David and Goliath confrontation, which attracted many onto the side of the underdog. However, severe repressive measures can sometimes bring emergent social networking to a halt if people perceive the risks of continuing to be too great. For example, the emergent student-led democracy movement in China was brutally suppressed by the Chinese military, and many demonstrators were killed in Tiananmen Square in June 1989. The hardline government response effectively prevented the further development of a widespread movement for democratic change.

Critical points

Smelser's theory was subjected to critical attacks. In focusing attention on generalized beliefs, his model implied that individuals are motivated to start social movements for irrational reasons, rooted in misleading ideas about their situation. This fell back into an older tradition that saw movements as unusual or marginal phenomena. Social movement studies since Smelser have moved towards seeing activists as rational actors who weigh the costs and benefits of their actions (see Olson 1965) and social movements as part and parcel of social life rather than marginal to it. Smelser's theory was also structural functionalist in orientation, setting social movements in the context of their adaptive function during periods of rapid social change. Movements reassure people that something is being done to deal with their concerns. But the theory suffered

indirectly from attacks on Parsonian functionalism and, probably unfairly, was not built on until quite recently.

In spring 2019, climate activists in the organization Extinction Rebellion staged a number of roadblocks in central London. Many members of the public reported that the inconvenience caused to everyday lives alienated them rather than bringing them onside with the movement's aims. The methods governments and authorities use to respond to such protests can also be instrumental in encouraging or discouraging further activism and public support.

Contemporary significance

Smelser's work on social movements has deservedly received more attention in recent years and is undergoing something of a resurgence. It still offers a multi-causal model of movement formation, and even critics have extracted elements from it – such as ideas within resource mobilization theory, political opportunity structures and frame analysis – which have proved very productive (Crossley 2002). Similarly, his model connects movement activism to social structures and may provide insights into the rise of new

social movements. Revisiting these stimulating ideas is long overdue.

Resource mobilization

Traditions of social movement research in the United States and Europe have tended to be quite different. In the USA, social movements have been studied using some form of rational choice theory, which assumes that individuals make rational decisions, weighing up the choices facing them. In Europe, though, as we will see later, the focus has been much more on the connections between social movements and social classes. It has been suggested that American approaches concentrate mainly (though by no means exclusively) on the question of *how* movements become organized, while European approaches consider *why* social movements emerge when they do (Melucci 1989).

One of the most influential American perspectives is resource mobilization theory (RMT). RMT developed in the late 1960s and the 1970s, partly as a reaction to social unrest theories, which portrayed social movements as 'irrational' phenomena. Against this view, advocates of RMT argued that movement participants behaved in rational ways and that movements were purposeful, not chaotic (Oberschall 1973; Tilly 1978; Zald and McCarthy 1987). RMT theorists argued that capitalist societies produce chronic discontent among sections of the public, which renders social unrest theories problematic. If social unrest is always present, the emergence of movements cannot be explained by reference to it. What turns discontent into mobilizations and social movements is the availability of the necessary *resources* to mount effective campaigns. This point is nicely illustrated by Storr (2002: 82):

The central insight of resource mobilization theory is actually very basic: social movements need resources. Suppose you and I are members of a social movement. If we want to call a meeting, we need to have somewhere to hold it. If we want to publicize a protest action such as a demonstration, we need to be able to make leaflets, posters or fliers and to reproduce large numbers of them, and to distribute them widely. If we want to book our meeting space or contact our printer, we are probably going to need a telephone – and some money to pay for it all. As well as these material resources, we are more likely to be successful if we can call on other, less tangible resources – an address book full of useful contacts, practical know-how in poster design or website construction, and even just the time and energy to devote to our activism. According to resource mobilization theory, the more of these resources we can mobilize, the more likely we are to be successful in our pursuit of social change.

In RMT, political dissatisfaction is not enough, in itself, to bring about social change. Without resources, dissatisfaction does not become an active force. RMT does have something of an economistic feel, drawing similarities between social movements and the competitive market economy. That is, the theory pictures social movements as operating within a competitive field of movements – a 'social movement industry' – within which they compete for scarce resources, not least members and activists. Social movement organizations (SMOs) therefore find themselves in competition with other SMOs, some of which may appear to share their aims.

Although RMT helped to fill the gap left by social unrest theories, producing detailed studies of how movements and movement organizations acquire resources and mobilize campaigns, critics still see these as partial accounts. In particular, RMT underplays the effects of broad social changes, such as the trend towards post-industrialism or globalization processes, on social movements. For example, the increasingly global political context has meant that traditional UK conservation organizations such as the National Trust have been challenged by newer environmental organizations such as Greenpeace

and, more recently, Extinction Rebellion, whose ideologies and international campaigns fit the changing context more closely.

RMT also has little explanation for social movements that achieve success with very limited resources. Piven and Cloward (1977) analysed 'poor people's movements' in the USA, such as unemployed workers in the 1930s, black civil rights in the 1950s and welfare movements of the late 1960s and the 1970s. Surprisingly, they found that their main successes were achieved during the formative stage, before they became properly organized. This was because activists in the early stages were very enthusiastic and took part in many direct actions such as strikes and sit-ins. However, once they became more effectively organized, direct actions became fewer, the 'dead hand of bureaucracy' (described by Weber and Michels) took over, and movements lost momentum and impact. This is quite the reverse of what we would expect according to RMT and shows that, sometimes, a lack of resources can be turned to a movement's advantage.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Choose a social movement from the ones discussed so far and research its history and development. Using RMT, show *how* the movement became organized and *why* it succeeded or failed. How might the use of social media affect the way that movements garner resources?

New social movements

Since the late 1960s there has been an explosion of social movements around the globe. Among these are student movements of the 1960s, civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s, anti-nuclear and ecological movements of the 1980s, disabled people's movements and gay rights campaigns. Collectively, this group of movements is often referred to by European scholars as new social movements (NSMs). This is because they are seen as ushering in a new *type* of social movement (Touraine 1971, 1981). NSM theories try to address the question of why this happened when it did, and, in some ways, this approach complements that of RMT on how movements

garner resources and make use of them. However, 'new' in this context means more than just 'contemporary'. There are four main ways in which NSMs are said to differ from 'old' movements, which we will now outline.

New issues

NSMs have introduced new issues into political systems, many of which are relatively unrelated to simple material self-interests. Instead, these issues are concerned with the 'quality of life', including the state of the global environment, animal welfare and animal rights, peaceful (non-nuclear) energy production, and the 'identity politics' associated with gay rights and disabled people's movements.

For NSM theorists, these movements reflect a very broad social transformation from an industrial to a post-industrial society. While industrial politics centred on wealth creation and its distribution, post-industrial politics centres on post-material issues. Ronald Inglehart (1977, 1990) conducted surveys of social values in more than twenty-five industrialized countries and found that younger generations exhibited post-material values. That is, they took for granted a certain material standard of well-being and were more likely to be concerned with the quality rather than the quantity of life.

This 'glacial', generational shift in values, Inglehart argued, could be explained by several factors. Those born after 1945 did not experience the depression and hardship of their parents' generation, nor did they have personal experience of war. Rather, they became used to post-war peace and affluence, being raised in the context of a 'post-scarcity socialization', in which the historic obstacle of food scarcity at least appeared to have been solved for good. This generation also had a different experience of work as a growing service sector took over from the old industrial workplaces. These enormous social changes led to the demise of an 'old' politics, which was rapidly giving way to a 'new', post-industrial form of politics.

New organizational forms

NSMs also appeared to be different in the way they organized. Many of them adopted a loose form that rejected the formal organization that

earlier social movement theorists argued was necessary for success. NSMs looked much more like loose networks of people. In addition, they seemed to have no single centre or headquarters, preferring a polycephalous, or 'many-headed', structure. This meant that, should one local group break the law and face prosecution, the rest of the network could carry on, but this structure also suited the emotional needs of activists, who tended to be younger and imbued with post-material values and identities.

Alberto Melucci (1989) saw that this organizational form itself carried a message, namely the symbolic rejection of the aggressively masculine, bureaucratic power politics of the industrial age, typified by trade unions and party politics. The first president of the Czech Republic, Vaclav Havel (1988), described this as anti-hierarchical and 'anti-political politics'. What marked out this new form was a self-imposed limitation. NSMs did not seek to take over the state and use its power to change society; instead, they appealed directly to the public. This strategy has been described as a 'self-limiting radicalism' that contrasts sharply with the state-centred politics of socialism and the labour movement (Papadakis 1988).

New action repertoires

Like other social movements, NSMs make use of a range of protest actions, from political lobbying to sit-ins and alternative festivals, but one thing that characterizes the kinds of actions they take, their 'action repertoire', is non-violent, symbolic direct actions. Many actions aim to present to the public aspects of society that were previously unseen and unknown. For example, campaigns against toxic waste dumping in the UK, the culling of seal pups in Newfoundland, the destruction of woodlands for road-building, or the existence of disabling environments all showed people things about which they may not have been aware. NSMs use new digital media to generate support – filming protests, showing videos on the internet, organizing campaigns via social media and text messaging, and encouraging ordinary people to become involved in politics. Such efforts illustrate well the point made by Melucci (1985) that NSMs are forms of communication – 'messages'

to society which present symbolic challenges to the existing political system.

New social constituencies

Finally, many studies of NSM activists have shown a predominance of the 'new' middle class which works in post-1945 welfare state bureaucracies, creative and artistic fields, and education (including many students). This finding led some to describe NSM activism as a form of 'middle-class radicalism' (Cotgrove and Duff 1980). Many of the large demonstrations – against nuclear weapons, in favour of animal welfare, and so on – attract a 'rainbow coalition' of retired people, students, first-time protesters, feminists, anarchists, socialists, traditional conservatives, and many more. However, it seems that the working classes are not involved in significant numbers. Again, this marks a significant change from the industrial period with its working-class-based movements (Eckersley 1989).

Many observers argue that NSMs are a unique product of post-industrial society and are profoundly different to the collective action of earlier times. We can view new social movements in terms of a 'paradox of democracy'. While trust in traditional politics seems to be waning, the growth of NSMs is evidence that people are not apathetic or uninterested in politics, as is sometimes claimed. Rather, there is a belief that direct action and participation are more useful than reliance on politicians. More than ever before, people are supporting social movements as a way of highlighting complex moral issues and putting them at the centre of social life. In this respect, NSMs may be revitalizing democracy and are at the heart of a strong civic culture or civil society (Habermas 1981).

NSM theory has come in for some sharp criticism. All the supposedly 'new' features identified above have been found in 'old' social movements. For example, post-material values were evident in some small-scale communes in the nineteenth century (D'Anieri et al. 1990). A focus on identity creation was also a crucial, perhaps defining, aspect of all nationalist movements and early women's movements, and the use of non-violent direct action was used in the resistance to British colonial rule in India and is commonly associated with Mahatma

Gandhi. Such historical evidence led Calhoun (1993) caustically to describe these old movements as 'new social movements of the early nineteenth century'.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

20.2 The Gay Liberation Front

The following article, celebrating thirty years of gay liberation, appeared in 2000.

The formation of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) in London in 1970 was the defining watershed moment in queer history. For the first time ever, thousands of lesbians and gays stopped hiding in the closet and suffering in silence. We came out and marched in the streets, proclaiming that we were proud to be gay and demanding nothing less than total equality. That had never happened before. Lots of gay people in 1970 were ashamed of their homosexuality and kept it hidden. They wished they were straight. Some went to quack doctors to get 'cured'. Many accepted the bigot's view that being 'queer' was second rate.

Thirty years ago, the state branded gay sex as 'unnatural, indecent and criminal', the Church condemned homosexuality as 'immoral and sinful' and the medical profession classified us as 'sick' and in need of 'treatment'. Queers were routinely sacked from their jobs, arrested for kissing in the street, denied custody of their children, portrayed in films and plays as limp-wristed figures of ridicule, and only ever appeared in the news as murderers, traitors and child molesters. Straights vilified, scapegoated and invisibilised us – with impunity. And very few gay people dared question heterosexual supremacy.

…

Inspired by the Black Power slogan 'Black is Beautiful', GLF came up with a little slogan of its own, which also had a huge impact: 'Gay Is Good!'. Back then, it was absolutely outrageous to suggest there was anything good about being gay. Even liberal-minded heterosexuals mostly supported us out of 'sympathy' and 'pity'. Many reacted with revulsion and horror when GLF proclaimed: '2–4–6–8! Gay is just as

good as straight!' Those words – which were so empowering to queers everywhere – frightened the life out of smug, arrogant straight people, who had always assumed they were superior.

This challenge to heterosexual supremacism kick-started a still ongoing revolution in cultural values. GLF overturned the conventional wisdom on matters of sex and human rights. Its joyous celebration of gayness contradicted the straight morality that had ruled the world for centuries. The common-sense, unquestioned assumption had always been that queers were bad, mad and sad. All that prejudiced nonsense was turned upside down in 1970. While politicians, doctors, priests and journalists saw homosexuality as a social problem, GLF said the real problem was society's homophobia. Instead of us having to justify our existence, we forced the gay-haters to justify their bigotry.

Like many others of my generation, GLF changed me for the better – and forever. When I heard about the formation of the Gay Liberation Front, I could not wait to get involved. Within five days of my arrival in London from Australia, I was at my first GLF meeting. A month later I was helping organise many of its witty, irreverent, defiant protests. Being part of GLF was a profound personal liberation – arguably the most exciting, influential period of my life.

GLF's unique style of 'protest as performance' was not only incredibly effective, but also a lot of fun. We had a fabulous collection of zany props and costumes, including a whole wardrobe of police uniforms and bishop's cassocks and mitres. Imaginative, daring, humorous, stylish and provocative, our demonstrations were both educative and entertaining. We mocked and ridiculed homophobes with wicked satire, which made even the most hard-faced straight people realise the stupidity of bigotry.

…

There were also more serious acts of civil disobedience to confront the perpetrators of discrimination. We organised freedom rides and sit-ins at pubs that refused to serve 'poofs' and 'dykes'. A lecture by the psychiatrist Professor Hans Eysenck was disrupted after he advocated electric-shock aversion therapy to 'cure' homosexuality.

As well as its feisty protests, GLF pioneered many of the gay community institutions that we now take for granted. It set up the first help-line run by and for gay people (which later became Gay Switchboard), the first pro-gay psychiatric counselling service (Icebreakers), and the first gay newspaper (*Gay News*). These and many other trail-blazing institutions helped shape the gay community as we know it today, making a huge positive difference to the lives of lesbians and gay men.

A Gay Liberation Front (GLF) demonstration

Thirty years on, we've come a long way baby! As we look back at the giant strides for freedom that lesbian and gay people have made since 1970, let us also remember with pride that GLF was where it all started.

Source: Abridged from Tatchell (2000).

Others see NSM theorists as too quick to draw radical conclusions from weak empirical evidence. Over time, some NSMs have developed formal organizations and become more bureaucratic than the theory allows for. Greenpeace is the most notable example. Originally a loose network of like-minded individuals involved in numerous direct actions, Greenpeace has become a very large business-like organization with a mass membership and huge financial resources. Indeed, it seems to conform much more to the long-term process of change identified by Blumer and RMT. Finally, even some apparently 'new' issues have been seen as much older. Environmental politics, for instance, can be traced back to the European and North American nature defence organizations of the mid-nineteenth century and is perhaps best understood as an enduring social movement which has passed through various stages of growth and decay (Sutton 2000; Paehlke 1989).

Globalization and the 'social movement society'

Despite the critical barrage aimed at NSM theory, it is apparent that social movements now operate in a very different set of historical circumstances to previous movements. In particular, processes of globalization mean that systematic and much more immediate connections across national boundaries become possible and, with this, the feasibility of genuinely transnational or global social movements (Tarrow 2005).

The rise of NSMs also reflects some of the changing risks now facing human societies. The conditions are ripe for social movements as increasingly traditional political institutions find it harder to cope with the challenges before them, such as climate change. These new

problems and challenges are ones that existing democratic political institutions seem unable to fix, and as a result they are frequently ignored until a full-blown crisis is at hand. The cumulative effect of these challenges and risks may be a growing sense that people are 'losing control' of their lives in the midst of rapid change. Individuals feel less secure and more isolated – a combination that leads to a sense of powerlessness. By contrast, corporations, governments and the media appear to be dominating more and more aspects of people's lives, heightening the sensation of a runaway world (Giddens 2002). There is a growing sense that, left to its own logic, globalization will present ever greater risks to citizens' lives.

In the midst of the digital revolution, social movements are able to join together in huge regional and international networks, comprising non-governmental organizations, religious and humanitarian groups, human rights associations, consumer protection advocates, environmental activists, and others who campaign in the public interest. These electronic networks have the unprecedented ability to respond immediately to events as they occur, to access and share sources of information, and to put pressure on corporations, governments and international bodies as part of their campaigning strategies.

The use of social media to share information, build online communities and organize demonstrations is an increasingly common resource for social movements. Online chat, discussion and organization also enable movements to develop without a distinct and identifiable leadership. For example, a now famous Facebook video blog by the Egyptian activist Asmaa Mahfouz – posted one week before thousands of Egyptians occupied Tahrir Square in January 2011 – was credited with encouraging many young people online to become involved in the uprising. In 2019, the rapid spread of protests in Hong Kong against proposed legislation to allow extradition to mainland China involved groups using social media using the slogan 'be formless, shapeless, like water' (Rachman et al. 2019). Similarly 'formless' social media-inspired campaigns have been seen in Chile, Lebanon and France, where a trigger event – such as public transport price rises, a tax on WhatsApp

messages and petrol tax rises, respectively – sparked protests on a broader front.

Castells (2015: 2) characterizes these and many others as 'networked social movements' that 'spread by contagion in a world networked by the wireless Internet and marked by fast, viral diffusion of images and ideas.' For instance, without the internet, Zapatista rebels in Mexico would have remained an isolated left-wing guerrilla movement in southern Mexico. But within hours of their armed uprising in January 1994, a range of support groups had emerged online promoting their cause. However, Castells argues that the discursive spaces created by movements are not restricted to online environments but also involve physical, urban space such as public squares and buildings of symbolic significance. He sees the 2011–12 'Arab Spring' movements and the 'Occupy' protests that spread to 951 cities in eighty-two countries as examples of this (ibid.). Their rapid spread shows that a key aspect of the new networked movements is their tendency to move very quickly across national borders.

While rejecting some of the claims to novelty of NSM theories, Tarrow (1998: 207–8) argued that 'What *is* new is that they have greater discretionary resources, enjoy easier access to the media, have cheaper and faster geographic mobility and cultural interaction, and can call upon the collaboration of different types of movement-linked organizations for rapidly organized issue campaigns.' Acknowledging these changes raises the prospect of a 'social movement society', in which the nationally bounded social movements of the past give way to the movements without borders discussed above (Meyer and Tarrow 1997).

Since 2001 there have been annual meetings of the World Social Forums (WSF), essentially forums in which organizations and groups from within national civil societies meet and share ideas. In particular, the forums allow a space for activists around the world who seek an alternative form of globalization to the free-market capitalist version they believe has become dominant. The forums are seen by some as containing the germs of an emerging global civil society, enabling stronger international networks and closer coordination. The non-violent WSF provides one example of a 'movement without borders',

but the global terrorist networks of al-Qaeda is another (Sutton and Vertigans 2006). It is not inevitable that an emerging 'movement society' will mirror the non-violent wave of NSMs in the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, ready access to weapons and the information needed to build them holds out the very different prospect of a violent social movement society.

See chapter 21, 'Nations, War and Terrorism', for a wider discussion of violence in human affairs.

[Conclusion](#)

The sphere of politics has clearly undergone some major changes over recent decades. Democracy has become more widespread around the world, but, in many of the established representative democracies, many voters are less than enthusiastic participants. On the other hand, grassroots social movements are thriving, bringing new issues and campaigning methods into the mainstream. The conventional left–right political divide looks much less clear-cut today than in the past. Is opposing road-building on environmental grounds a right-wing or a left-wing position? Is the campaign for equal transgender rights 'left-wing' and, if so, why are some otherwise 'left-wing' feminists concerned? Are those who propose that animals have rights on the political left or right? These issues seem to cut across the old political divide, and they are becoming more relevant for younger generations than the older, materialist politics rooted in factories and workplaces.

The financial crisis of 2008 and the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020 brought home just how tightly integrated the world's societies have become, but they also showed that political coordination and global governance still lag far behind. Even within regional groupings such as the EU, national interests tend to take precedence in difficult times, precisely when coordinated action is required for the collective good. For example, eurozone countries were deeply divided about how best to assist heavily indebted Greece in 2008–9 and who should pay for bailouts. During the Covid-19 pandemic it was national governments that made the key decisions on how to handle the spread of the virus within their borders; some even closed their borders to 'outsiders' for a time. The world, it seems, remains a very long way from establishing effective forms of genuinely global governance.

Nonetheless, there is another side to such global crises. The IMF, United Nations and World Health Organization all played key roles in the Covid-19 outbreak, advising national governments and helping them to formulate their management plans. Similarly, the global scientific community shared their findings as scientists worked to produce effective tests and a vaccine for the virus. Yet national political interests

were again in evidence during the pandemic, when the US president, Donald Trump, argued that the WHO had not been critical enough of China's actions in controlling the spread of the virus and promptly suspended all US funding to the organization.

Probably the best example of the meshing of national interests with global action is tackling anthropogenic climate change, which demands *global* agreement if *national* self-interests are to be best served. The very concept of a 'national interest' is being reformulated in a globalizing world. And yet, the resurgence of national populism around the world is a powerful reminder that national identities still have a strong emotional pull as sources of stability and historical continuity, even as the human world becomes ever more tightly integrated.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. List the main elements commonly associated with the field of political sociology.

2. 'Power is the capacity to achieve one's aims even against the resistance of others.' Whose view of power is this? Outline the additional dimensions of power discussed by Stephen Lukes.

3. Provide two examples of authoritarian states. How would you characterize the relationship between the state and the people in these systems?

4. How is representative democracy different from participatory democracy? Does the former still fit the ideal of 'government of the people by the people'?

5. Outline some key ideas of the major elite theorists. Does elite theory give us a more realistic account of the power imbalance in societies than Marxist class theory?

6. How did Weber characterize bureaucracy and why was he fearful of its impact on democracy? Outline and assess Paul du Gay's defence of bureaucracy.

7. With examples, explain what is meant by 'ideology' in political sociology. Provide examples of the newer ideologies and give some reasons why they have risen to prominence.

8. What is populism? Why has an agreed definition of this ideology proved so difficult?

9. Outline the main reasons for the global spread of democracy. In newly created democratic systems, citizens vote enthusiastically, but in the established democracies voter turnout in elections is falling. Why is this the case?

10. How does the concept of 'global governance' differ from 'global government'? Provide some instances of global governance.

11. What are social movements? List some older and more recent movements, comparing their 'action repertoires'.

12. Outline the social movement theories of social strain, resource mobilization and new social movements. Provide an account of the origins, development and successes/failures of *one* social movement using the 'toolkit' from across these perspectives.

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

It is common for social movements to learn from each other, often adopting and adapting the tactics and campaigning methods taken from very different types of movement. For example, the successful non-violent direct actions of the new social movements soon spread across a range of movement networks and organizations. In recent years the expansion of social media sites has created new communicative opportunities, but movement activists may also use social media for a range of organizational purposes. How do activists make use of social media to publicize, build and expand their movements? Are there any downsides to moving into such popular, mainstream online environments?

The paper below explores these questions in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA, so read it carefully and take notes, then address the questions that follow.

Mundt, M., Ross, K., and Burnett, C. M. (2018) 'Scaling Social Movements through Social Media: The Case of Black Lives Matter', *Social Media and Society*, October–December: 1–14.

1. What methods were used in this research project? How were the data collected?

2. How do the authors characterize the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement? Why do they suggest that this movement is 'inextricably linked to the digital sphere' (p. 3)?

3. The paper identifies three main ways in which social media helps movements to develop: as a mobilization tool, as a coalition-building tool and as a narrative amplification tool. Explain each of these in relation to BLM.

4. What dangers and risks are there for movement activists who decide to make use of social media? How might these be mitigated?

5. How successful do you think this internet-based research was in addressing the questions it set itself?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

The fundamental left–right political cleavage is now seen by some as less useful because it is becoming less clear where key political issues lie on this spectrum. Which issues are touchstones for left- and right-wing attitudes today, and does it even make sense to continue to view ideologies through the old industrial politics lens of left and right? The *Political Compass* has been available online since 2001, allowing individuals to 'test' their political attitudes. The compass positions people in relation to the left–right and authoritarian–libertarian axes. Take the test here to find out where you are placed: www.politicalcompass.org/.

As we have seen, in recent years there has been a rise in national populist politics across Europe and elsewhere. From the sections on populism in this chapter and your own research into the policies and statements of three populist leaders of your choice, where might populists fit on the *Political Compass*? Can we even place populism within the two axes of the scheme? Is national populism a kind of 'thin ideology' that is malleable enough to attract people from very different positions on the compass?

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Banksy is a UK artist whose work has become globally famous. His street graffiti-artworks have been found mostly in London and other UK locations, but also in the USA, Israel, Mali, Canada and Australia. Banksy's identity remains unknown, and his work ranges from simple humorous pieces to significant political statements about current affairs, government policies and the actions of the police and the military. Examples of his work and a short discussion can be found in the following places.

1. Banksy's website here: https://banksy.co.uk/out.asp

2. A brief discussion of Banksy's art and six key works: www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-6-iconic-works-banksy

3. A listing of more than 100 of Banksy's outdoor artworks, with images: www.canvasartrocks.com/blogs/posts/70529347-121-amazing-banksy-graffiti-artworks-with-locations

Given the often stark simplicity of his political work, what kinds of political messages does Banksy convey? Are these inevitably quite general comments – such as anti-war or against nuclear weapons – that lack nuance, subtlety and detail or are there more sophisticated ways of reading the images? List the main political issues that dominate his street art. Why does he make so much use of images of children and animals for political purposes? Authenticated Banksy art sells for very large sums of money. Does this show that the art of protest has itself been assimilated into capitalistic consumer culture? Construct a defence of Banksy's protest art against this criticism.

Further reading

There are several excellent introductory texts, among which are Elisabeth S. Clemens's (2016) *What is Political Sociology?* (Cambridge: Polity), Kate Nash's (2010) *Contemporary Political Sociology: Globalization, Politics and Power* (Chichester: Wiley) and Betty A. Dobratz, Lisa K. Waldner and Timothy Buzzell's (2019) *Power, Politics and Society: An Introduction to Political Sociology* (2nd edn, New York: Routledge).

Still the most comprehensive coverage of political ideologies is Andrew Heywood's (2017) *Political Ideologies: An Introduction* (6th edn, London: Palgrave), which covers old and new ideologies. For democratization, see Jean Grugel and Matthew Louis Bishop's (2014) *Democratization: A Critical Introduction* (London: Red Globe Press), which does exactly what you might think. Then a very useful edited collection of essays covering democratization around the world can be found in Christian Haerpfer, Patrick Bernhagen, Christian Welzel and Ronald F. Inglehart's (2019) *Democratization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press). Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin's (2018) *National Populism: The Revolt against Liberal Democracy* (London: Pelican), is a measured, careful analysis of the underlying causes of contemporary populist movements and parties.

Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani's (2020) *Social Movements: An Introduction* (3rd edn, Hoboken, NJ: Wiley) is comprehensive and right up-to-date, while Greg Martin's (2015) *Understanding Social Movements* (London: Routledge) is a lively read with many contemporary examples that illustrate the various theories. Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper's (2015) *The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts* (3rd edn, Oxford: Blackwell) is an edited collection, engagingly organized according to the life cycle of social movements.

Finally, a very good general collection is Edwina Amenta, Kate Nash and Alan Scott's (2016) *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Political Sociology* (Chichester: Wiley), which covers much ground.

For a collection of original readings on political sociology, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ **Internet links**

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

ASA Section on Political Sociology – the American Sociological Association's own resources:
www.asanet.org/asa-communities/sections/political-sociology

Foreign Policy – US site based in Washington, DC, with lots of political articles and commentary:
https://foreignpolicy.com/

openDemocracy – UK site in London which publishes blogs and debates how people are governed:
www.opendemocracy.net/en/

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance – based in Stockholm, Sweden, provides resources in support of democratization:
www.idea.int/

World Politics Review **– 'a daily foreign policy, national security and international affairs Web publication':**
www.worldpoliticsreview.com/

Social Movement Studies **– a Routledge journal with many articles on a range of theories and movements**
www.tandfonline.com/toc/csms20/current

CHAPTER 21

NATIONS, WAR AND TERRORISM
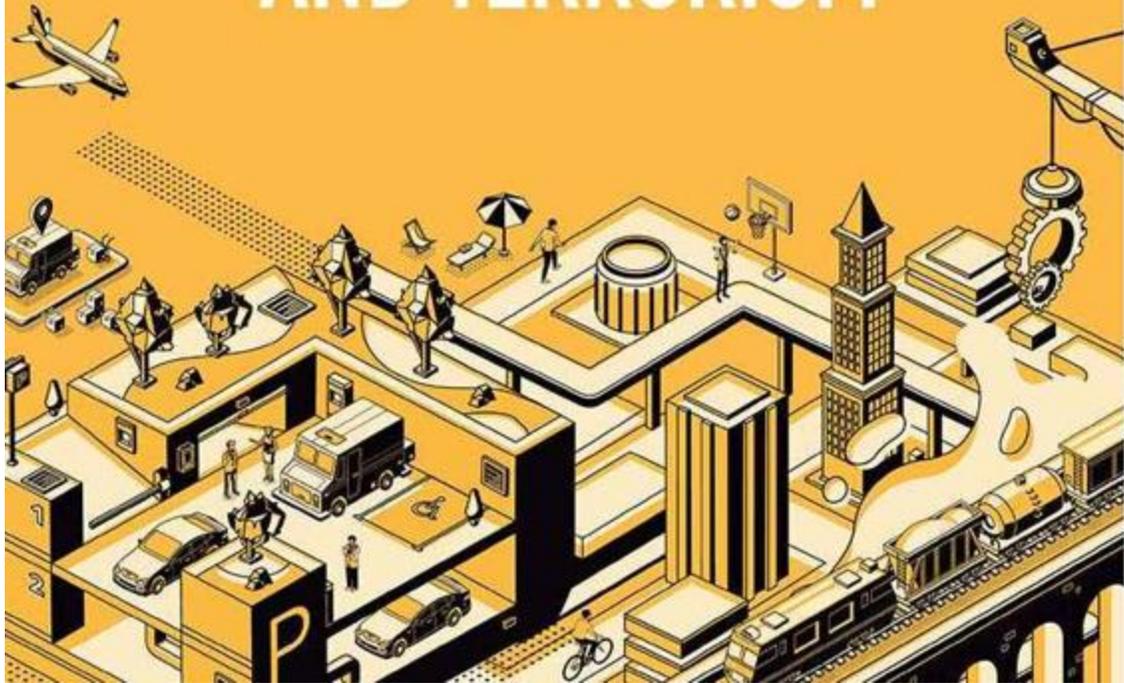
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This political rally before Hungary's general election of 2018 was in support of Viktor Orbán's Fidesz party, which has been in power since its landslide win in 2010. Fidesz achieved another landslide at the polls two days after the rally.

In April 2018, Hungary's prime minister, Viktor Orbán, won his third consecutive national election after gathering almost 50 per cent of the vote, which gave him 67 per cent of the seats in parliament, known as a 'super-majority'. This was the second time his Fidesz party had achieved such a landslide win, the first being in 2010. As the final results were being announced, Orbán told supporters that his win gave Hungarians 'the opportunity to defend themselves and to defend Hungary' (BBC News 2018f). But what do Hungarians need to be defended against?

Fidesz is a politically right-wing party that built its social and economic policies on Hungarian nationalism. Orbán's 2010 election campaign sought to convince voters that Hungary was under attack from external forces and 'colonizers', including 'multinational companies, foreign investors, the IMF and the European Union', and the country needed to strengthen its national sovereignty (Pogonyi 2019: 981–2). This also

involved full citizenship with voting rights for Hungarian nationals living abroad – a form of non-residential citizenship – as a way of promoting national reunification, even across national borders.

Since 2015, the Fidesz government has adopted an anti-immigration, anti-refugee position, and, despite a tiny Muslim population (around 5,000 in a population of 10 million), anti-Islam feeling and discourse have risen sharply since 2010. An opinion survey in 2016 found that 72 per cent of Hungarians had negative views of Muslims, much higher than the EU median of 43 per cent, while 82 per cent saw refugees as 'a burden' who take Hungarians' jobs and social benefits (Manevich 2016). One significant influence here was the influx of some 500,000 refugees, mainly fleeing civil wars in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, but also economic migrants from Africa, who travelled across Hungary's borders in order to get into Western Europe, most heading for Germany. Fewer than 1,000 stayed on in Hungary (Juhász et al. 2017: 7). The government's response was to build over 175 kilometres of fencing on the border with Serbia and Croatia and step up its anti-refugee discourse.

Hungarian nationalism today draws support from and cultivates the view that the country and its people are victims of an historical wrong, namely the loss of over two-thirds of its territory in the aftermath of the First World War, through the Treaty of Trianon (1920). This post-war peace agreement redrew national borders and left more than 3 million Hungarians living outside the reshaped country. Nostalgia for an earlier 'greater Hungary', which formed one part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that existed before 1920, also supports Fidesz's cross-border 'national reunification' project. Brubaker (2017) argues that Hungarian nationalism also draws on the rhetoric of civilizational conflict, pitting the country's culture and specifically its Christian identity against the supposed threats to it from many sides, including Islam, multiculturalism and LGBT+ rights campaigns.

Many social scientists see clear links between this kind of right-wing nationalism and contemporary political populism around the world (Krekó et al. 2019). Populism often pits 'the people' against liberal elites, globalists and cosmopolitans, EU bureaucrats, and transnational corporations owned by the super-rich. For populists, all of these

represent a challenge to the nation-state as the primary actor in global politics and therefore to national identities. It is certainly the case that the political map of the world is in constant flux. Today's map of nation-states looks very different from that which existed in 1920, 1945 and even 1975. However solid, 'natural' or permanent the world's nation-states may feel, in fact they are one of the more fluid aspects of human existence. Nation-states are regularly created and destroyed; civil wars divide established nations, leading to their break-up, and regional blocs are formed from previously disparate nation-states.

Populism is discussed in [chapter 20](#), 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

This chapter deals with the themes of nationalism, communal violence, warfare, terrorism and peace processes – issues that have exercised social scientists studying a variety of conflicts, such as that in Sudan, where South Sudan became an independent country in 2011, and the chronic conflict between Israel and Palestine. Why is the desire for national independence in the form of a nation-state so powerful? How is nationalism related to wars within and between nations? What is war anyway, and are there really 'rules' of warfare that govern 'acceptable' conduct?

Although we do not discuss it in this chapter, revolutions are covered in [chapter 20](), 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', with shorter analyses in [chapters 1](), 'What is Sociology?', [2](), 'Asking and Answering Sociological Questions', [3](), 'Theories and Perspectives', [4](), 'Globalization and Social Change', [9](), 'Stratification and Social Class', and [18](), 'Religion'.

We begin with a discussion of nations and nationalism of varying kinds, asking how globalization might be changing people's sense of their own national identity. We then move on to look at conflict, especially war and its close relation genocide, focusing particularly on conflicts involving nation-states. As war logically implies its opposite, we end this section with a brief look at recent scholarship on peace processes. The chapter ends with the phenomenon of terrorism, which seems to have become ever present, before drawing some tentative conclusions about future prospects for conflict, war and peace.

Nations, national identity and human rights

Nationalist movements, particularly those that emerged across the Global South to fight for national independence from European colonial oppression, have been highly significant political actors. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the early sociologists showed little explicit interest in nationalism. Marx and Durkheim saw it as, above all, a destructive tendency. Durkheim believed that the increasing economic integration produced by modern industry would cause its rapid decline, while Marx considered that nationalism would fade away under communism. Only Weber spent much time analysing nationalism or was prepared to declare himself an 'economic' nationalist.

In the twenty-first century, nationalism is not only alive, but today it is flourishing. Although the human world has become more interdependent as globalization progresses, this interdependence has not killed off nationalist sentiment. Indeed, in some respects, it has probably helped to intensify it. Recent scholarly debate has suggested contrasting ideas about why this is so. There are also disagreements about the stage of history at which the concept of 'the nation' and nationalism came into being.

The resurgence of nationalism in the former Yugoslavia is discussed in chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

Nationalism and modernity

One of the leading theorists of nationalism, Ernest Gellner (1925–95), argued that nationalism, the nation and the nation-state have their origins in the French and Industrial revolutions of the late eighteenth century. In this sense, nationalism and the feelings or sentiments

associated with it do not have deep roots in 'human nature', but are products of modernity. According to Gellner (1983), nationalism is unknown in previous forms of society, as was the idea of 'the nation'.

There are several features of modern societies that have led to the emergence of national phenomena. First, a modern industrial society is associated with rapid economic development and a complex division of labour. Gellner points out that modern industrialism creates the need for a much more effective system of state and government than existed before. Second, in the modern state, individuals must interact all the time with strangers, since the basis of society is no longer the local village or town but a very much larger unit. Mass education, based on an 'official language' taught in schools, is the main means whereby a large-scale society can be organized and kept unified.

Gellner's theory has been criticized in more than one respect. It is a functionalist theory, which argues that education functions to produce social unity. As with the functionalist approach more generally, this view tends to underestimate the role of education in producing conflicts and divisions. Gellner's theory does not really explain the strength and persistence of nationalism, which is related not just to education but also to its capacity to generate strong sources of identity for people. In that sense, perceived threats to national interests can also be understood as threats to the integrity of people's self-identity.

Flags are a potent symbol of national and political identities. Here, supporters of the 'leave' and 'remain' groups in London express their allegiances during the 2016 Brexit referendum.

The need for *identity* certainly does not originate with the emergence of modern, industrialized societies. In many ways, nationalism is quite modern, but it also draws on sentiments and forms of symbolism that go back much further into the past. One scholar of nationalism, Anthony Smith (1986), argues that nations tend to have perceived direct lines of continuity with earlier ethnic communities – or what he calls ethnies. An ethnie is a group that shares ideas of common ancestry, a common cultural identity and a link with a specific homeland.

> **THINKING CRITICALLY**
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> Taking the definition of 'ethnie' above, list some examples. Can you think of any nations that do not have connections to earlier ethnic communities?

Smith points out that in previous periods of history there have been ethnic communities that resemble nations. The Jews, for example, have formed a distinct ethnie for more than 2,000 years. At certain times, Jews clustered in communities that had some of the characteristics of nations. In 1948, following the genocide of Jews during the Second World War, the state of Israel was founded, marking the culmination of the Zionist movement, whose aim was to create a homeland for Jews scattered around the world. The Palestinian minority in Israel traces its origins to a quite different ethnic background and claims that the creation of the Israeli state has displaced the Palestinians from their ancient homelands – hence the persistent tensions between them and the Jews in Israel and between Israel and most surrounding Arab states.

[Classic studies 21.1](#) Norbert Elias – on the process of civilization

The research problem

How have some nations come to see themselves as 'civilized' and others as 'uncivilized'? How can self-styled 'civilized nations' conduct wars involving extreme violence and mass killing yet still maintain their civilized self-image? The German-born sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990) studied these issues in his twovolume *The Civilizing Process* (2000), first published in 1939. That year was not the time to be talking about 'civilized behaviour', as war was breaking out in Europe for the second time in just twenty-five years. Consequently, it was only when *The Civilizing Process* was published in English in 1969 that sociologists begin to take account of the book's wide-ranging significance.

Elias's explanation

Elias begins *The Civilizing Process* with an observation: the concept of civilization 'expresses the self-consciousness of the West. One could even say: the national consciousness.' He continues:

> It sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or 'more primitive' contemporary ones. By this term, Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of *its* technology, the nature of *its* manners, the development of *its* scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more. (Elias 2000 [1939]: 5)

In short, people in modern Western nations have come to understand their societies as setting the standard for civilized conduct and, therefore, as being superior to other types of society.

Comparing and contrasting England, France and Germany, the first volume of *The Civilizing Process* looks at the development of typically modern psychic structures and codes of manners. Elias uses many historical examples from etiquette and manners books to

show how standards of behaviour in relation to table manners, bodily functions (such as spitting and toileting), sexual expression and violence slowly changed. In particular, he demonstrates that the direction of change since the medieval period was towards increasing thresholds of repugnance and shame, with many behaviours previously considered 'normal' gradually coming to be seen as unacceptable. People developed stronger internalized self-restraints and exhibited a much more stable control over their emotions.

In the second volume, Elias develops a theory to explain these changes. He finds the key factors to be the process of state formation and the increasingly long and complex webs of interdependent relations in the early modern period. As courtiers vied with each other for prestige and influence in the European royal courts, new codes of conduct imposed on them a tighter and more even control of their emotions and violent outbursts. With this, a more individualized personality type developed among courtiers, making them the first 'modern people' (Korte 2001: 29). The cultivated and refined manners of courtiers set the standard for rising bourgeois classes and eventually spread to other social groups too. This more even, balanced and tightly regulated type of self-control, which became 'second-nature', can appear to others as rather detached and calculating.

The absolutist monarchies of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Europe exemplified the increasing centralization of societies. Competition for power among rival regions, towns and social groups often led to violent conflict and the elimination of the weakest or less well-organized group. As a result, fewer but larger social units developed via the logic of what Elias calls a 'monopoly mechanism'. This mechanism led to 'a state in which all opportunities are controlled by a single authority: a system with open opportunities has become a system with closed opportunities.' Thus, Elias explains the emergence of the modern nation-state, with its monopolization of the means of physical force and taxation (cited in Van Krieken 1998: 101).

What Elias shows in *The Civilizing Process* is that the formation of national states, alongside increasingly denser webs of social relations, is intimately tied to the emergence of the typically modern personality type. Only where the state monopolization of physical force is relatively stable and secure can individuals, from infancy onwards, become attuned to a new, higher level of self-control which then becomes 'second nature'.

Critical points

Elias's work has attained the status of a modern classic today, but it has also been criticized on several grounds. First, some have suggested that Elias overplays the differences between the modern individual and people in other societies. The German ethnologist Hans Peter Duerr argues that the notion of the civilizing process is 'a myth'. Human beings today are essentially similar to human beings of the past; there have been no 'uncivilized' or 'primitive' people. Duerr (1988) asserts, for example, that public 'nakedness' has always been a cause of shame and is not the product of 'civilization'.

Second, Elias sees social processes as essentially the unplanned outcome of many intentional actions. But critics point out that this assumption needs to be tested against the evidence in particular cases and seems to ignore deliberate 'civilizing offensives', such as those carried out by powerful social elites (Van Krieken 1998). Third, Elias's focus on civilizing processes may be criticized for neglecting or undertheorizing the 'dark side' of such processes. Western civilization was not a painless process, and, as Foucault has shown, it can feel far from 'civilized' for many social groups. Powell (2011) argues that the 'normal' operation of Western civilization can produce genocides, as the history of twentieth-century conflicts demonstrates. Hence, civilization and barbarism are not opposites; 'civilized conduct' among insider groups may be closely linked to 'barbaric acts' against outsiders.

Contemporary significance

Elias's ideas have been influential in many fields, not least historical sociology, the sociology of the body and the study of human

emotions. What continues to attract scholars to his work is the way it allows macro and micro levels to be linked through a central focus on dynamic social processes. Given current concerns about levels of violence in society, terrorism and genocide, it is likely that the study of civilizing and *decivilizing* processes will be one important aspect of sociology's attempts to understand why the recourse to physical violence continues to produce so much human suffering.

Nations have followed divergent patterns of development in relation to ethnies. In some, including most of the nations of Western Europe, a single ethnie expanded so as to push out earlier rivals. Thus in France up to the nineteenth century, several other languages were spoken to which different ethnic histories were linked. The French state forced schoolchildren to learn French – they would be punished if they spoke their home language – so that, by the early twentieth century, French became the dominant language and most of the rival languages largely disappeared.

Yet remnants of these have persisted, and many are officially encouraged again. One is the Basque language, from the area that overlaps the French and Spanish frontiers. The Basque language is quite different from either French or Spanish, and the Basques claim a separate cultural history of their own. Some Basques want their own nation-state, completely separate from France and Spain. While there has not been the same level of violence that other areas have seen – such as in East Timor or Chechnya in southern Russia – around 800 people were killed during the forty-year-long bombing campaigns by the Basque separatist group ETA. However, in October 2011, ETA announced a 'definitive cessation' of their armed struggle, saying that they were in the transition to peaceful methods of achieving independence.

We should not see the nationalisms and national populisms of today as anomalous, fringe phenomena. Malešević (2019: 8) argues that nationalism is in fact a *grounded ideology* that 'stands at the basis of the modern social order' and has been part of the political projects of liberals, socialists, feminists and many more. It also has a very broad appeal across different social groups in society and is embedded within

organizations and social institutions. These are some of the reasons for its dogged persistence.

An easily overlooked but vital aspect of nationalism is the way it lives in and through routine social interactions at the micro level of social life in routine community and family talk, pub discussions about national sporting events, involvement in rituals celebrating the nation such as commemorations of wartime sacrifice, and in the everyday consumption of national symbols and objects in the media, museum displays and much more (Skey 2011; Fox and Miller-Idriss 2008). Hence, it follows that 'successful nationalist projects are premised on the organizational translation of the ideological grand narratives into the micro, family and friendship-based stories' (Malešević 2019: 14).

Previous forecasts that nationalism would gradually wither away as globalization, mass movements of people and a cosmopolitan culture developed now look to be wide of the mark. Instead, nationalism has proved to be a remarkably flexible ideology that is actually enjoying a resurgence in many regions of the world.

The continuing conflict between Israel and the stateless Palestinian people has led to Israel building a controversial security wall. Here, graffiti on the security wall between Israel and Palestine points to the unresolved situation that, to date, has made lasting peace all but impossible.

Nations without states

The persistence of well-defined ethnies within established nations leads to the phenomenon of nations without states. In these situations, many of the essential characteristics of the nation are present, but those who comprise the nation lack an independent political community. Separatist movements, such as those in the Basque country and in Israel/Palestine, as well as those in many other areas of the world, are driven by the desire to set up an autonomous, self-governing state.

Several different types of nations without states can be recognized, depending on the relationship between the ethnie and the larger nation-state in which it exists (Guibernau 1999). First, in some situations, a nation-state may accept the cultural differences found

among its minority or minorities and allow them a certain amount of active development. Thus, in Britain, both Scotland and Wales are recognized as possessing histories and cultural features that are partly divergent from the rest of the UK and so have some of their own institutions.

Scotland, for instance, has a tradition of Presbyterianism represented in the Church of Scotland, and the country has separate educational and legal systems from those of England and Wales. Scotland and Wales achieved further autonomy within the UK as a whole with the setting up of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly in 1999. The Scottish National Party (SNP), which is committed to independence, was elected to government in 2007 and won outright in 2011. Although it lost a vote on independence from the UK in 2014, the SNP took all but three of the Scottish seats in the 2015 UK election. Similarly, the Basque country and Catalonia (the area around Barcelona in northern Spain) are both recognized as 'autonomous communities' within Spain. They possess their own parliaments, which have a certain number of rights and powers. In both Britain and Spain, however, much power still remains in the hands of the national governments and parliaments, located in London and Madrid respectively.

A second type of nations without states consists of those that have a higher degree of autonomy. In Quebec (the French-speaking province of Canada) and Flanders (the Dutchspeaking area in the north of Belgium), regional political bodies, without actually being fully independent, have the power to take major decisions. As with those nations mentioned under the first type, they contain nationalist movements agitating for complete independence.

Third, there are some nations which more or less completely lack recognition from the majority population or the state that contains them. In such cases, the larger nation-state uses force in order to deny recognition to the minority. The fate of the Palestinians is one example; others are the Tibetans in China and the Kurds, whose homeland overlaps parts of Turkey, Syria, Iran and Iraq. The Tibetans and Kurds date their cultural history back over many centuries. The Tibetan leader in exile, the Dalai Lama, is at the centre of movements outside the country which aim to achieve a separate Tibetan state through non-

violent means. Among the Kurds, on the other hand, several independence movements, mostly located abroad, proclaimed violence as the means of achieving their ends, and the Kurds have a 'parliament in exile', based in Brussels. However, after the first Gulf War of 1990–1, allied forces established a 'safe haven' and a level of autonomy for Kurds in northern Iraq, which was extended and consolidated following the overthrow in 2003 of the regime led by the former dictator Saddam Hussein.

In the case of the Tibetans, there is little chance of achieving even limited autonomy unless the Chinese government decides at some point to change its existing policies. But, in other instances, it is possible that national minorities might opt for autonomy within, rather than complete independence from, the states in which they are located. In the Basque country and Catalonia, for example, a minority of the populations currently support complete independence. However, in Scotland, opinion polls in 2020 showed a small majority in favour of independence, six years after a referendum in which a majority voted to stay within the UK (Philip 2020).

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
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> Nations have been described as 'imagined communities' (Anderson 2006 [1983]). No one can personally know everyone within a nation, hence its unity must be assumed or imagined. What practical activities keep imagined communities alive over generations, even where no state exists?

In the case of national minorities in Europe, the European Union has a significant part to play. The EU was formed through allegiances created by the major nations of Western Europe. Yet a key element of the philosophy of the EU is the devolution of power to localities and regions. One of its explicit goals is to create a 'Europe of the regions'. This emphasis is strongly supported by most Basques, Scots, Catalans and other national minority groups. Their right to relate directly to EU organizations, such as the European Parliament or European courts of law, might give them sufficient autonomy to be satisfied that they are in control of their own destinies. Hence it is perhaps conceivable that

national minorities may push for independence within the EU while also accepting a cooperative relationship with the larger nations of which they are a part.

The basic roles and functions of the EU are introduced in chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements'.

Nations and nationalism in the Global South

In most of the Global South, the course followed by nationalism, the nation and the nation-state has been different to that of the industrial societies. Most countries of the Global South were once colonized by Europeans and achieved independence at some point in the second half of the twentieth century. In many of these countries, boundaries between colonial administrations were agreed arbitrarily in Europe and did not take into account existing economic, cultural or ethnic divisions among the population. The colonial powers defeated or subjugated the kingdoms and tribal groupings existing on the African subcontinent, in India and in other parts of Asia and set up their own colonial administrations or protectorates. As a consequence, each colony was 'a collection of peoples and old states, or fragments of these, brought together within the same boundaries' (Akintoye 1976: 3). Most colonized areas contained a mosaic of ethnies and other groups.

When former colonies achieved independence, they often found it difficult to create a sense of nationhood and national belonging. Although nationalism played a great part in securing the independence of colonized areas, it was confined largely to small groups from the urban elites and intellectuals. Nevertheless, nationalist ideas did influence large numbers of people, though political differences often crystallized around ethnic differences, such as those in Rwanda or Kenya. Even today, many postcolonial states are continually threatened by internal rivalries and competing claims to political authority.

The continent that was most completely colonized was Africa. Nationalist movements promoting independence in Africa following the Second World War sought to free the colonized areas from European domination. Once this had been achieved, new leaders everywhere faced the challenge of trying to create national unity. This was not easy, as many of the leaders in the 1950s and 1960s had been educated in Europe or the USA, and there was a vast gulf between them and their citizens. Under colonialism, some ethnic groups had prospered more than others; these groups had different interests and goals and legitimately considered one another as enemies.

Sudan, Zaire and Nigeria all saw civil wars, while ethnic rivalries and antagonisms characterized many other postcolonial states, in both Africa and Asia. In the case of Sudan, about 40 per cent of the population (mostly in the north) were Muslim of Arabic ethnic origin, while in other regions of the country, particularly the south, most of the population was black and followed traditional religions (such as [animism](#)), though a minority were Christian. Once nationalists took power, they embarked on a programme for national integration based on Arabic as the national language. The attempt was only partly successful, as many in the south saw the new government as imposing Islam and an Arabic identity.

Civil war broke out in 1955 between the south and Sudan's government in the north. A peace accord in 1972 gave new powers and some autonomy to the south, but, when the government annulled these agreements in 1983, liberation armies rose up again. The ensuing conflict lasted until 2005, when a comprehensive peace agreement was reached which gave the south its regional autonomy. In July 2011, a referendum was held that finally gave South Sudan full independence from the north (the latter is still called Sudan). However, internal conflicts and land disputes at the border continued even after independence, and civil war broke out in 2013 following a dispute between president and vice president. The civil war had devastating consequences: it lasted five years, killed between 50,000 and 383,000 people and displaced 4 million more, who fled their homes (Council on Foreign Relations 2020a). A power-sharing agreement was finally

reached in 2018, but fighting continued until a coalition government was formed in February 2020 (Ajak 2020).

Nigeria provides another example of the issues involved as African countries move on from the legacy of colonial domination. The country has a population of some 120 million people – roughly one out of every four Africans is a Nigerian. Nigeria was formerly a British colony and achieved independence on 1 October 1960. The country contains many ethnic groups but three are dominant: the Yoruba, Ibo and Hausa. Armed struggles developed in the country in 1966 between different ethnic groups, and a military government ruled until 1999 when elections were held.

Successive governments have attempted to build a clearer sense of national identity around the theme of 'motherland Nigeria', but creating a sense of national unity and purpose remains difficult and authoritarianism persists within the political culture. However, the 2011 presidential election was widely seen as overwhelmingly fair and free from violence, and in the 2015 election Muhammadu Buhari's victory saw the first democratic transfer of power and heightened hopes for a democratic future.

In summary, most states in the Global South came into being as a result of different processes of nation formation from those that occurred in the industrialized world. States were imposed externally on areas that often had no prior cultural or ethnic unity, sometimes resulting in civil war after independence. Modern nations have arisen most effectively either in areas that were never fully colonized or where there was already a great deal of cultural unity – such as Japan, China, Korea or Thailand.

[Nation-states, globalization and human rights](#)

How does globalization affect nationalism and national identity? Pilkington (2002) argues that nationalism is actually quite a recent phenomenon, despite the fact that many nationalists claim their nations have histories stretching back into the mists of time. Until relatively

recently in historical terms, humans survived in small settlements, largely unaware of what went on outside their own groups, and the idea of being members of a larger nation would have seemed alien. Only later, from the eighteenth century onwards, with the development of mass communications and media, did the idea of a national community develop and spread. Pilkington says that it was during this period that national identities were 'constructed'.

Social constructionism is discussed in more detail in chapter 5, 'The Environment', chapter 7, 'Gender and Sexuality', and chapter 12, 'Social Interaction and Daily Life'.

Crucial in developing a sense of nationhood was the existence of some 'Other', against which a national identity was formed. For instance, central to the shaping of a (Protestant) British identity was the existence of (Catholic) France. Pilkington documents how a sense of Britishness spread downwards from the country's elite to the rest of society as levels of literacy spread throughout the whole population and as communications technology enabled the spread of ideas. If national identity is socially constructed, then it is possible that it will change and develop, and one of the main factors in changing national identity today is globalization.

Globalization produces conflicting pressures between centralization and decentralization and, as a result, brings about a dual threat to national identity: centralization creates pressures from above, particularly with the growing powers of the European Union, and decentralization creates pressures from below, through the strengthening of ethnic identities. Pilkington says that a parallel response is also found among some members of ethnic minority groups, who, feeling excluded from British identity, strengthen their local identities and assert their differences from other ethnic groups. A second response to globalization, which Pilkington clearly thinks is a

healthier one, is to accept that there are multiple identities – to argue, for example, that it is possible to be English, British and European all at the same time. Such 'hybrid identities' are found among ethnic minority groups in the UK, such as British Asians and other 'hyphenated identities'.

Hybrid social identities, such as British Asian, may offer a way of constructing national identities in the multicultural societies that are emerging within processes of globalization.

While in some parts of Africa we may see nations and nation-states that are not yet fully formed, in other parts of the world some already argue that we are seeing 'the end of the nation-state' in the face of globalization. For example, Ohmae (1995) argues that, as a result of globalization, we increasingly live in a 'borderless world' in which national identities inevitably become weaker. All states are certainly affected by globalizing processes, but it would not be accurate to say that we are witnessing the widespread end of the nation-state and identification with 'the nation'. Indeed, there are counter-trends towards a renewed national identification, as illustrated in the UK referendum vote to leave the EU and the way that Donald Trump's 2016

election slogan, 'Make America Great Again', chimed with large numbers of US voters.

Today, every country in the world is, or aspires to be, a nation-state, but for much of the twentieth century colonized areas and empires existed alongside nation-states. The last empire to collapse was the Soviet one in 1991. The Soviet Union was effectively at the centre of an empire embracing its satellite states in Eastern Europe, but all of these are now independent, as are many areas inside what was formerly the Soviet Union. However, in a blow to Ukrainian independence, Russian troops effectively annexed its Crimea region, leading to the 'Republic of Crimea' joining the Russian Federation in 2014 after a hasty referendum. Some 9,000 people died in the conflict in southern and eastern regions of Ukraine, and the EU imposed economic and military sanctions on Russia for its involvement.

There are actually far more sovereign nations in the world today than there were twenty-five years ago, and nation-states have been the central actors in the most severe and devastating conflicts ever experienced. Yet the nation-state is also the political body capable of granting and protecting the rights of its own citizens and promoting the rights of the individual more generally. As we shall see in the next section, there are some important differences between the concept of national citizenship and that of human rights.

Human rights – universal and particular

It may appear obvious that the concept of individual human rights stands in opposition to organized violence such as war, genocide and terrorism, but historically this is not the case. Malešević (2015: 560) argues that the demand for the recognition of basic rights first emerged in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries in the context of intra-Christian

conflicts and discrimination against Jewish people in Poland. But it was the French and American revolutions that led to the establishment of formal documents setting out human rights, in the US Declaration of Independence and Virginia Declaration of Rights (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen (1789).

A global concept of human rights took root in the wake of the Second World War, prompted by the massive loss of life and the deliberate targeting of civilian populations (Turner 2006). This was set out in 1948 by the UN in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This document ran to thirty Articles covering fundamental principles such as the right to life, liberty, privacy and security, alongside specific issues such as slavery, torture, cruelty, arrest and detention, marriage and property (UN 1948). It is important to note that this modern conception of human rights applies to everyone by virtue of being human, and in that sense it has universal application. Despite this, Turner argues that the idea of human rights means little unless those rights are enforceable. The contrast between national citizenship and universal rights shows how significant this insight is.

Where nation-states grant citizenship to all of those people living within their territories, citizenship rights can be enforced by using the full panoply of the state: a police force, armed forces and a legal system, as well as local and national government. Citizenship also involves contributions by citizens, such as the payment of taxes and obeying state laws, which entitles them to protection and state benefits. But there exists no similar global body or set of institutions that is capable of enforcing human rights around the world, and human rights are not linked to any corresponding duties or obligations on the part of individuals.

Organizations such as Amnesty International, together with governments and individuals around the world, have expressed horror at the unfathomable violence meted out by Islamic State to civilians, and the UN carried a resolution in 2015 stating that member states which have the capacity to do so should 'take all necessary measures' to remove IS from Iraq and Syria. Yet this was approved on grounds of national self-defence rather than the individual human rights of Iraqis and Syrians. As Turner (2006: 5) says, there is a clear distinction

between the 'social rights of citizens and the human rights of persons', and citizenship is a more effective basis for upholding people's rights.

For some sociologists, universal rights rooted in simply 'being human' are not a good starting point. Benjamin Gregg (2011) argues that human rights are socially constructed, locally developed and achieved by communities, not imposed 'from above'. All ideas of universal human rights that are immediately applicable across culture and societies are unattainable and unrealistic. For instance, what is the right to life? Gregg suggests this is not as clear as may at first appear: 'Does it mean a right of a human embryo to the life it has? Would "the life it has" mean a right to be free of genetic manipulation? Might it mean a right of an embryo in vitro to be implanted into a uterus ... Is it a right to a chance of life?' (2011: 3). If such a basic right as this is questionable, how much more culturally variable and contentious are other human rights?

Yet the concept of universal human rights applicable to all persons across the world continues to motivate a range of people, organizations and social groups to protect and defend those facing discrimination and persecution, wherever they may be. It seems likely that the idea of universal human rights, like other concepts that are hard to pin down, such as socialism or sustainable development, is an 'active utopia' (Bauman 1982). As Frezzo (2014: xxi) points out, 'we must envisage universalism not as a *fait accompli*, but rather as a project to be pursued on an ongoing basis.' That is, although there may be widespread acknowledgement that achieving universality may not be possible, the process of working towards it is more important in establishing what real and practically achievable rights can be enjoyed by humans.

War, genocide and transitions to peace

One major theoretical tradition in sociology is the conflict tradition, which includes important research by Marxists, feminists and Weberian scholars (see [chapter 1](#)). However, much of this work concentrates on chronic social conflicts *within* societies, such as those involving social classes, gender relations and ethnic conflicts, that do not break out into open violence. Even when sociologists investigate cross-national conflicts, these are seen in similar terms. For example, the 2003 invasion of Iraq has been explained by some Marxists in essentially economic terms, as an attempt to establish secure oil supplies for the USA and its allies. Such studies and explanations have much to tell us about conflict, but, as a discipline, sociology has not given the study of war and violent conflict as much prominence as it could have done, preferring to leave the subject to historians and military theorists.

One important reason for this is the widely held view that war is not a 'normal' state of affairs and is not central to the development of sociological theories and explanations. After all, it does not make much sense to base general social theories on highly unusual and very specific events. But this assumption is not correct. Warfare is as old as human societies, and over the course of human history there have been more than 14,000 wars (Roxborough 2004). Estimating the number of deaths in or caused by warfare in history is fraught with difficulties. Some suggest the overall figure may be as high as 4 billion, but it is extremely challenging to come to firm conclusions, given the lack of proper records for most of that time and disagreements over which conflicts count as 'wars'. Even the recent past does not yield agreement. Twentieth-century wars are said to have accounted for 'more than 110 million' deaths (Malešević 2010: 7) or, alternatively, a more definitive '231 million' deaths (Leitenberg 2006: 1). Whatever the correct figure may be, the point remains that wars are not 'unusual' events.

From a global perspective, a very good case could be made for the opposite assumption: that the existence of wars is normal in human affairs, while periods of real peace have been quite rare. In the Global North, the period since 1945 has been just such a period, and perhaps it

is this that has contributed to the idea that war is somehow abnormal (Inglehart 1977). As the figures above show, massive loss of life and human suffering demands that sociologists explore the causes and consequences of war. Additionally, Joas and Knöbl (2012: 5) rightly argue that, 'if we fail to take account of war, we can understand neither the constitution of modernity through the *nation state* – rather than transnational processes – nor many of the social and cultural changes that have occurred in the modern age.'

Theorizing war and genocide

What is war? Martin Shaw (2003: 5) defines it as 'the clash of two organized armed forces that seek to destroy each other's power and especially their will to resist, principally by killing members of the opposing force'. This definition makes organized killing central to the actual practice of war, a fact that was borne out in the enormous loss of life in two twentieth-century world wars, in which a large number of the world's societies became involved. The definition also makes clear that the central aim of war is to 'destroy the enemy's power', thus rendering it unable to resist.

As we will see in 'Classic studies' 21.2, this notion was expressed in Carl von Clausewitz's (1993 [1832]) classic statement that 'war is the continuation of political intercourse by other means'. Clausewitz argues that wars are engaged in by states and are fought because political calculations are made about the likelihood of success and decisions taken by leaders. They require economic resources to be committed, and they usually play on real, perceived or created cultural differences in order to mobilize populations emotionally. War is therefore a social phenomenon whose nature has changed over time.

Historically, those killed in war have tended to be armed combatants rather than civilians, which shows that war is not simply chaotic, random killing – hence the idea of the 'rules of war' that regulate what opposing forces can legitimately do in combat and afterwards. Nevertheless, such rules have often been broken in battle conditions, and in many conflicts of the past century there has been much deliberate targeting of civilian populations as another means of

'destroying the enemy's will to resist'. Shaw describes the deliberate extension of targets to unarmed civilians as a form of illegitimate or 'degenerate war', seen in the Japanese massacres of more than 260,000 Chinese civilians in 1937, the British fire-bombing of German cities, including Hamburg in 1943 and Dresden in 1945, and the American nuclear bombing of the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945.

The changing nature of war

Before the twentieth century, most wars made extensive use of mercenary armies or men conscripted into armed forces. Weaponry consisted of swords and, latterly, firearms, and military transport was based on horses, horsedrawn carriages and sailing boats. Even during the First World War (1914–18) horses remained a major form of transport. By the time of the Second World War, weapons and transport had changed considerably. Machine guns, tanks, chemical weapons and aeroplanes provided the capacity for armed forces to engage in the mass killing that characterizes war today.

A common-sense view would perhaps see wars as conflicts between nation-states for dominance, and, until quite recently, many social scientists might have agreed. However, interstate wars seem to be becoming less common, especially since 1945. An analysis by Dupuy and Rustad (2018) reports that, between 1945 and 1960, interstate conflicts accounted for half of all armed conflicts across the world. Since 1960, and particularly since 1975, the number of interstate wars has declined dramatically. On the other hand, the quantity of intrastate conflicts (civil wars and internal conflicts) rose from 1945, reaching a peak in 1991 before falling again. However, intrastate conflicts that involve international actors, such as the USA and Russia, have been increasing. Of the fortyeight in progress in 2017, 40 per cent involved troops from an external state, and the USA was the country most involved. The balance between *inter*state and *intra*state wars seems to have shifted significantly.

In addition, Shaw (2005) argues that, in many contemporary wars affecting Western states – such as those involving the USA and its allies

in Iraq and Afghanistan – attempts are now made to protect the lives of Western military personnel in order to avoid potentially damaging media coverage that might lead to negative political and electoral consequences for governments at home. This is one reason why recent Western involvement often takes the preferred forms of drone strikes and massive air strikes, which minimize the risk to armed forces. But, in effect, this amounts to the transference of the risks of warfare onto civilian populations below, whose deaths become 'collateral damage' or 'unavoidable accidents of war'. This new mode of 'risk transfer' war has the potential to damage the older, rule-governed type and thus opens Western states and everyone else to even more risks. When civilians are intentionally targeted, the question of whether 'genocide' has been committed is now commonly raised.

Genocide is a term that has been used with increasing regularity in the mass media and political discourse. It was used, for example, to describe the Serb regime's assault on ethnic Albanians in Kosovo, the Hutu regime's attacks on Tutsis in Rwanda and Myanmar's military assault on the Rohingya people. Originally employed by Raphael Lemkin in his book *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe* (1944), it was adopted in 1948 by the United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide (Article 2), which says:

> Genocide means any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial or religious group, as such:
>
> a. killing members of the group;
>
> b. causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group;
>
> c. deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part;
>
> d. imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group;
>
> e. forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

This was among the first attempts to define genocide and is clearly rooted in the Nazi racial policies against many sections of the European population, including the attempt to exterminate the Jewish people, in the Second World War (1939–45). Genocide is seen here as separate

from war. Whereas killing in war can be considered legitimate (if the rules of war are not broken), genocide is, by definition, always wrong. The UN definition makes intention central to genocide. A particular social group need not *actually be* exterminated for genocide to be deemed to have taken place; what matters is that the perpetrator's *intention* was to exterminate the enemy.

[Classic studies 21.2](#) Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (1832)

Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831) is the classic modern theorist of war. A Prussian army officer who fought in the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars (1793–1815), he taught at the military academy, where he wrote the book published posthumously as *On War*. If social scientists fully recognized the centrality of war in modern society, this work by Clausewitz would figure in canons of social thought alongside those of near contemporaries such as the philosophers Immanuel Kant and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, the sociologist Auguste Comte and the revolutionary Karl Marx.

Clausewitz's book contained a number of seminal ideas.

1. His most famous maxim is that 'war is the continuation of political intercourse [also translated as either policy or politics] by other means.' This is often interpreted as meaning that the course of war is determined by its political objectives. However, Clausewitz's real originality lay in his exploration of the 'otherness' of military means.

2. He emphasized that war is 'an act of force' designed to compel an enemy to submit, and hence it has 'no logical limit'. From this he concluded that escalation is a law of war, and that there is a general tendency for war to become absolute. Restricted political objectives can limit escalation only partially, since the clash of arms is always likely to surpass preordained political limits and so is intrinsically unpredictable.

3. War was likely to be contained by *friction* – i.e. the obstacles to escalation created by inhospitable climate and terrain together with the logistical difficulties of deploying armies over long distances.

4. War can be compared as a social process to commerce. In this light, battle is the moment of realization – the end to which all

activity is geared – in war in the same way as exchange in commerce.

5. War is a *trinity* of policy (the province of government), military craft (the business of generals) and raw violence (supplied by the people). Thus the involvement of the people (the nation in arms) is partly responsible for the peculiarly destructive character of modern war in comparison with those of earlier periods....

Modern war is sometimes described as 'Clausewitzian'. The main problem with this description is that industrial society gave war enormously more powerful means of destruction – not only weaponry but also military and political organization – than Clausewitz could have foreseen. Modern *total war* combined total social mobilization with absolute destructiveness. From the middle of the nineteenth century, this radically expanded the scope for slaughter beyond Clausewitzian conditions. The logical conclusion of this process was the truly total, simultaneous and mutual destruction threatened by nuclear war.

Source: Shaw (2003: 19–20).

THINKING CRITICALLY

How might Clausewitz's main arguments help us to explain the development and restrictions on the possession of nuclear weapons? Does the doctrine of 'mutually assured destruction' (MAD) go beyond Clausewitz's ideas?

One problem is demonstrating *intention* in order to prove that genocide has taken place. Orders to kill may never be written down, evidence may be incomplete or non-existent, particularly in the case of non-state actors in conflicts, and many things can be achieved by acts of omission as well as acts of commission. That is, the destruction of a social group can be brought about by neglect and indifference as well as by deliberate attacks. Also, non-combatants in civil wars should not be seen merely as passive victims of large-scale political violence orchestrated by states. In many civil wars, civilians have used the

context of violence to pursue their existing local and interpersonal disputes. Indeed, Kalyvas (2006) suggests that analysing the ways in which the political issues of conflicts interact with such local disputes offers a productive way of bridging the divide between macro- and micro-level studies of warfare.
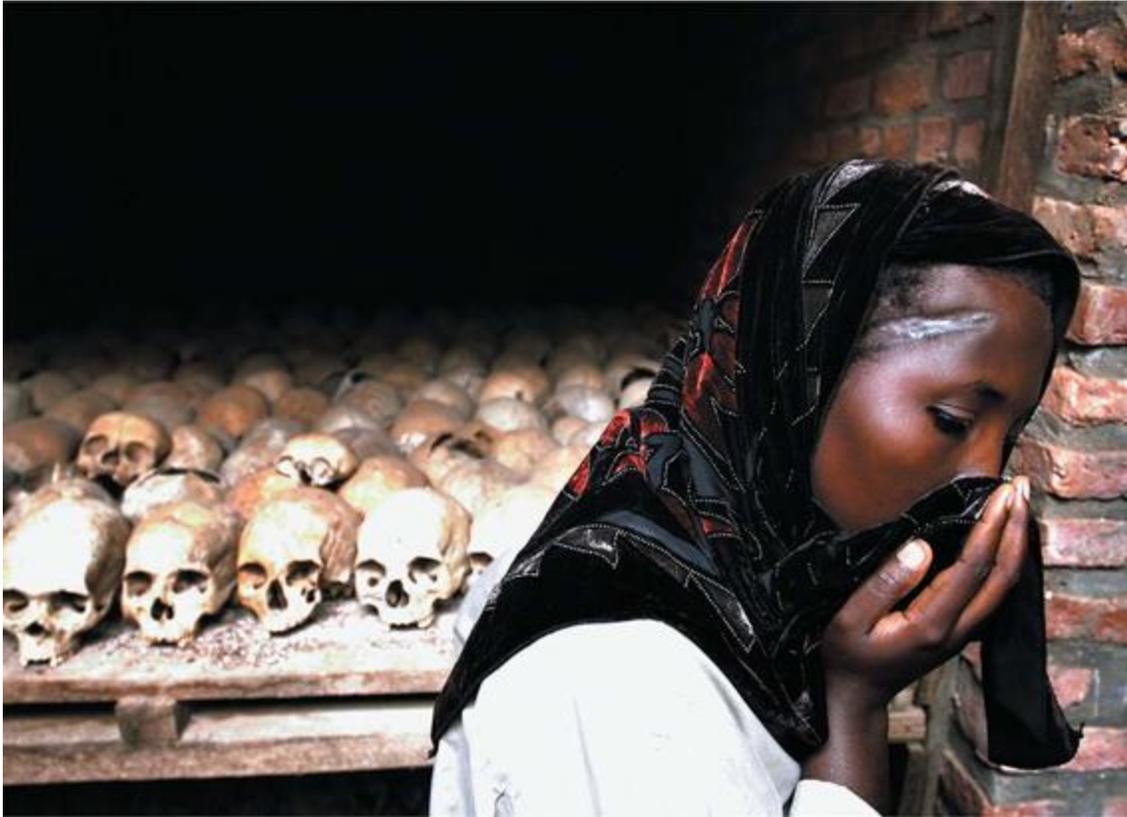
The Hutu regime in Rwanda claimed the lives of more than 800,000 Tutsis during the genocide of 1994. This conflict is discussed in chapter 8, 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

Global society 21.1 Cambodia's 'Khmer Rouge' regime

The Khmer Rouge was the ruling party in Cambodia from 1975 to 1979, but during this short time it was responsible for one of the worst mass killings of the twentieth century. The brutal regime claimed the lives of more than a million people – and some estimates say up to 2.5 million perished. Under the Marxist leader Pol Pot, the Khmer Rouge … [forced] millions of people from the cities to work on communal farms in the countryside. But this dramatic attempt at social engineering had a terrible cost, and whole families died from execution, starvation, disease and overwork.

Communist philosophy

The Khmer Rouge had its origins in the 1960s, as the armed wing of the Communist Party of Kampuchea – the name the Communists used for Cambodia. Based in remote jungle and mountain areas in the north-east of the country, the group initially made little headway. But after a right-wing military coup toppled the head of state Prince Norodom Sihanouk in 1970, the Khmer Rouge entered into a political coalition with him and began to attract increasing support. In a civil war that continued for nearly five years, it gradually increased its control in the countryside. Khmer Rouge forces finally took over the capital, Phnom Penh, and therefore the nation as a whole in 1975.

During his time in the remote north-east, Pol Pot had been influenced by the surrounding hill tribes, who were self-sufficient in their communal living, had no use for money and were 'untainted' by Buddhism. When he came to power, he and his henchmen quickly set about transforming Cambodia – now renamed Kampuchea – into what they hoped would be an agrarian utopia. Declaring that the nation would start again at 'Year Zero', Pol Pot isolated his people from the rest of the world and set about

emptying the cities, abolishing money, private property and religion, and setting up rural collectives.

Anyone thought to be an intellectual of any sort was killed. People were often condemned for wearing glasses or for knowing a foreign language. Hundreds of thousands of the educated middle classes were tortured and executed in special centres. The most notorious of these centres was the S21 jail in Phnom Penh, where more than 17,000 men, women and children were imprisoned during the regime's four years in power....

Opening up

The Khmer Rouge government was finally overthrown in 1979 by invading Vietnamese troops, after a series of violent border confrontations. The higher echelons of the party retreated to remote areas of the country, where they remained active for a while but gradually became less and less powerful.

In the years that followed, as Cambodia began the process of reopening to the international community, the full horrors of the regime became apparent. Survivors told their stories to shocked audiences, and in the 1980s the Hollywood movie *The Killing Fields* brought the plight of the Khmer Rouge victims to worldwide attention.

Pol Pot was denounced by his former comrades in a show trial in July 1997, and was sentenced to house arrest in his jungle home. But less than a year later he was dead – denying the millions of people who were affected by this brutal regime the chance to bring him to justice. However, in 2011, the regime's four most senior surviving leaders (all over 80 years old) were brought for trial on charges of genocide, and a former Khmer Rouge prison chief, known as 'Duch', was found guilty of crimes against humanity and sentenced to 35 years imprisonment after an unsuccessful appeal.

Source: Extracted from BBC (2007); BBC News (2012a).

Shaw (2003, 2015) rejects the separation of genocide and war. As he notes, most genocides occur within interstate or civil wars. In most historical cases of genocide, states (or power centres within states)

were the perpetrators, state armies, police forces and party organizations carried them out, and they took place within the context of war. Hence, it may be more accurate to define genocide as 'a form of war in which social groups are the enemy' (Shaw 2003: 44–5). And, if genocide *is* a form of war, it raises the question of whether the dominant form of war is changing.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

21.1 Modernity and the Holocaust

'The Holocaust' is a phrase used to describe a specific instance of genocide: the systematic attempt by German National Socialists, led by Adolf Hitler, to exterminate Jews in Europe during the Second World War. Jewish populations in Germany and other countries that were invaded by German troops were persecuted, crowded into ghettos and transported to extermination camps, where mass killing took place in gas chambers. Approximately 6 million Jewish people were murdered in these few short years as part of the Nazis' 'Final Solution of the Jewish Question'. Although many other social groups, such as Eastern European Roma, disabled people, gay men and communists, were also singled out for persecution, conventionally these have not been included in definitions of the Holocaust.

Zygmunt Bauman (1989) discovered that sociologists have had very little to say about the Holocaust or its consequences for social science. He suggests that part of the reason for this is that the Holocaust is seen as a specific aspect of Jewish history which holds no general lessons for other times and places. Second, there exists a widely accepted interpretation of the Holocaust, which sees it as an aberration, a dreadful and unique episode of barbarism in the otherwise peaceful flow of social life in civilized, modern societies. Bauman argues that we cannot let modern societies off the hook so lightly. The Holocaust, he says, is the ultimate *test* of modernity.

In fact, says Bauman, it was the characteristically modern elements that made the Holocaust possible. Modern technology was deployed to speed up the process of mass killing, bureaucratic systems of administration ensured the most efficient method of processing 'human bureaucratic objects', and the bureaucratic mentality dehumanized Jewish people, allowing individuals to avoid moral responsibility for their actions. Bauman also explores the role of

racist ideology and the way that victims were led into acquiescence in the extermination process through rational calculation of survival chances at every stage. All of these elements – modern technology, bureaucracies, racism and rational calculation – are 'normal' or common aspects of modern societies.

In the Holocaust these elements were brought together in a unique way. Bauman theorizes that this became possible as the German state systematically set about dismantling and destroying the voluntary organizations, trade unions and other tissues that make for a strong civil society. This left the centralized nation-state, with its monopolization of the means of violence, free to pursue its social-engineering projects without any controls or countervailing powers. In short, modernity provided the *necessary* resources that made the Holocaust possible, but this was not *sufficient* without the state's emancipation from the restrictions placed on it by society at large.

For Bauman, there are two main lessons from the Holocaust. The first is 'the facility with which most people, put into a situation that does not contain a good choice, or renders such a good choice very costly, argue themselves away from the issue of moral duty (or fail to argue themselves towards it), adopting instead the precepts of rational interest and self-preservation. *In a system where rationality and ethics point in opposite directions, humanity is the main loser*' (1989: 206; emphasis in the original). But the second lesson is: '*It does not matter how many people chose moral duty over the rationality of self-preservation – what does matter is that some did. Evil is not allpowerful. It can be resisted*' (ibid.; emphasis in the original). Of course we may agree with Bauman that people's actions aimed at self-preservation were indeed a choice rather than an inevitability. But the context in which such choices were made did largely shape the overall outcome. As the historian E. H. Carr (1962: 62) once argued, 'numbers count in history.'

Resistance by Jewish people during the Second World War included a rebellion in 1943 at the Treblinka concentration camp and several in Jewish ghettos. During the Warsaw ghetto uprising of January 1943, several thousand Jewish people fought the Nazi SS and killed hundreds of German soldiers. They were eventually overwhelmed by the army and 13,000 were killed.

Old and new wars

Warfare is always based on the available resources, social organization and level of technological development of societies. Some recent

theories have argued that we are witnessing a revolution in military affairs based on the increased use of information technologies, which are moving to the centre of military strategy. For example, satellite targeting systems, drones and computers played key roles in the conflicts in Iraq (1990–1 and 2003), Afghanistan (2001–) and Libya (2011) and in the attacks on the Islamic State/*Daesh* group in Syria (2011–19). It is clear that methods of waging war are never fixed but, rather, change over time alongside the economic, social and political development of societies.

Similarly, the industrialized, *total wars* of the early twentieth century, with their mobilization of entire national populations in the war effort, were radically different from earlier conflicts involving much smaller armies, which took place without the participation of large parts of civilian populations, many of which were unaffected by them. Some scholars have argued that the nature of war has changed quite dramatically again over the past thirty years or so, as a type of war has come to the fore which contrasts sharply with the nation-state wars of the twentieth century.

Whereas 'old' wars were fought by nation-states against each other, 'new' warfare threatens to undermine the nation-state as the primary 'survival unit' (Elias 1991: 205) which guarantees the safety and security of individual citizens, by challenging one of its central characteristics: the state monopoly of organized violence. The transnational connections involved in new wars challenge the state monopoly 'from above', while the 'privatization of violence' in paramilitary groups and the involvement of organized crime threatens the state monopoly 'from below'.

In one highly influential account of the 'new wars', Mary Kaldor's (2012) *New and Old Wars* argues that a new type of war began to emerge in Africa and Eastern Europe from the late twentieth century. One way of describing this has been to see it as 'low-intensity conflict', essentially similar to small-scale guerrilla warfare, or even terrorism, involving localized violence. Many could be called civil wars within particular nation-states. However, Kaldor rejects the 'civil war' label for such conflicts, pointing out that they also have many transnational connections, and this makes the distinction between external

aggression and internal repression impossible to sustain. New wars also erode the boundaries between warfare among states, organized crime and violations of basic human rights as these have become linked.

For example, in the Bosnian war of 1992–5, a genocidal conflict between Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian nationalist groups resulted in at least 100,000 deaths. On all sides, human rights violations took place in attempts to create ethnically 'pure' areas. Bosnian Serbs received financial and logistical support from Serbia (which, at that time, covered much of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) and during the conflict embarked on a campaign of '[ethnic cleansing](#)' (attempts to displace an ethnic group from a specific area) against non-Serbs; this involved many human rights abuses against civilians, including massacres and the systematic mass rape of women.

The massacre of some 8,000 boys and men at Srebrenica in July 1995 was declared genocide by an International Criminal Tribunal at The Hague. The tribunal reported that:

> By seeking to eliminate a part of the Bosnian Muslims, the Bosnian Serb forces committed genocide. They targeted for extinction the forty thousand Bosnian Muslims living in Srebrenica, a group which was emblematic of the Bosnian Muslims in general. They stripped all the male Muslim prisoners, military and civilian, elderly and young, of their personal belongings and identification, and deliberately and methodically killed them solely on the basis of their identity. (Traynor 2004)

However, in 2007, the International Court of Justice declared that the *state* of Serbia did not directly commit the genocide (though some individuals were charged), but that it had broken international law by failing to stop it. This was the first time a state had faced genocide charges. Kaldor argues that such large-scale violations of human rights make new wars illegitimate and that ways must be found to prevent them.

Kaldor maintains that the end of the Cold War is one factor in the rise of new war. But more significant is the increasingly rapid process of globalization that began in the 1970s, carried along on the wave of new

information technologies. Globalization, she says, lies at the heart of new wars, which can include a range of actors, from international reporters, advisers, mercenaries and volunteers to Oxfam, Médecins Sans Frontières and other NGOs, along with international institutions such as the UN, African Union and Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Kaldor argues that:

> the wars epitomize a new kind of global/local divide between those members of a global class who can speak English, have access to the Internet and satellite television, who use dollars or euros or credit cards, and who can travel freely, and those who are excluded from global processes, who live off what they can sell or barter or what they receive in humanitarian aid, whose movement is restricted by roadblocks, visas and the cost of travel, and who are prey to sieges, forced displacement, famines, landmines, etc. (Kaldor 2012: 5)

This argument implies that we may be witnessing a reversal of the state-formation processes identified by Norbert Elias and Max Weber. During the emergence of the modern state, *centripetal* forces were in the ascendancy as the means of violence became more centralized. However, since the late twentieth century, *centrifugal* forces are gaining the upper hand as the means of violence become distributed more widely among populations. As the number of new wars has increased in the wake of the ending of the Cold War, it may be that the close of an old world order has created a climate in which new war has flourished. The collapse of communist regimes left a legacy of surplus weaponry as well as a power vacuum, which local militia groups and armies can use to their advantage.

Critics of the new war thesis say that some of its key arguments are exaggerated and that nation-states are still the key actors in wars and conflict. For example, the historian Antony Beevor (2007) maintains that the targeting of civilian populations can be seen in many previous conflicts. In particular, during the Second World War, the targeting of civilians by all sides was a significant aspect of operations on the Eastern Front. Hirst (2001) sees the activities of armed militias in the Greek–Turkish war of 1921–2 and the Spanish Civil War of 1936–9 as essentially similar to the more recent low-intensity conflicts identified

by Kaldor. Similarly, contemporary wars in the Global South may be viewed as closer to conventional warfare than to low-intensity conflict. Earlier European wars involved the use of famine as part of warfare, as well as the plundering of resources and guerrilla tactics avoiding direct confrontations – all features described in the new war thesis as recent developments (Angstrom 2005).

Kaldor's reliance on the thesis of rapid globalization has also been criticized. Hirst (2001) argues that the new war thesis underplays the continuing significance of 'old' interstate wars, such as those between Iran and Iraq or the Arab–Israeli wars. For Hirst, the new war theory is far too dependent on the notion that 'globalization changes everything', when the evidence is that the nation-state is still the institution in which people invest their loyalty and on which they ultimately rely to protect their interests. This is an important point, as it undermines the importance placed by Kaldor on international institutions in resolving conflicts. International humanitarian interventions, such as the UN's role in the Bosnian war, are just as likely to reactivate old problems as they are to produce long-lasting solutions, given the involvement of 'old' nation-states with their historical alliances and enmities.

Perhaps it is too early to be sure that new wars will become the dominant type of war in the future. But, assuming that the present trend continues, should we welcome the purported slow demise of interstate warfare? Certainly, it is unlikely that new wars will produce the sheer scale of death and destruction that interstate wars of the twentieth century did. But in their place may arise a more insidious privatization of the means of violence, which threatens to 'decivilize' societies by challenging the assumption that the state can guarantee a relatively pacified internal space for citizens (Fletcher 1997). The modern world will have to find ways of dealing with the localized but chronically destabilizing conflicts of the future.

Peace processes

While there has always been sociological interest in social conflicts and, in recent years, more sociological research into war, genocide and terrorism has taken place, it is true to say that 'academic interest in

peace studies has been rather negligible' (Chatterjee 2005: 17). This may be, in part, because of the assumption that conflict is a form of deviance that needs to be explained, while peace is somehow the 'normal' condition of social life. On the other hand, there has also been much biological and ethological speculation that aggression and violence are somehow inherent in human nature. Sociological research sidesteps these overly philosophical issues, focusing instead on drawing general conclusions from comparative, historical and empirical case studies (Das 2005).

Our starting point here is that both war and peace are possibilities in human relations. As Malešević (2010: 2) argues, 'Being social does not automatically imply an innate propensity towards harmony and peace. On the contrary, it is our sociality, not individuality, which makes us both compassionate altruists and enthusiastic killers.' And, while much effort has been expended on understanding the causes of wars and communal violence, this has not been matched by studies of peace processes – all of those official and informal activities aimed at preventing future violence and ensuring fairness and equitable resource distribution in post-conflict situations.

But there is an important role for a sociological perspective here, as sociology offers analyses that look at peace processes as they are played out across the whole of society. This includes assessing the roles played by the many groups and organizations that make up civil society, as well as the professional negotiators, politicians and official initiatives which form the basis of most other studies.

Peace processes are linked to the type of violence that has previously occurred and have been seen as moving through four phases. The *pre-negotiation* phase often involves secret negotiations aimed at agreeing terms for cessation of the violence. This is followed in the second phase by a *formal ceasefire* and in the third stage by *negotiations*, often difficult and protracted, during which political agreement is reached between the adversaries, perhaps via a neutral mediator. In the final phase – *post-settlement peacebuilding* – combatants are reintegrated into society and victims are involved in processes of reconciliation (Darby 2001).

In the aftermath of violent conflict, some societies achieve a 'positive peace' in which fairness and an equitable distribution of resources is more or less achieved. However, others have to make do with a 'negative peace', in which physical violence is removed or controlled but underlying tensions and issues of inequality and a lack of fairness remain. [Post-violence societies](#) are those which have moved from wars or communal violence towards non-violence, as in Rwanda, South Africa, Sri Lanka and Northern Ireland. Brewer (2010: 19–27) identifies three basic types: 'conquest', 'cartography' and 'compromise'.

Conquest post-violence societies are mainly those affected by wars between nation-states, though the category also includes those where internal communal violence is ended by conquest, as in civil wars or colonial wars. The *cartography* type is where peace has been achieved mainly by physically separating the previous adversaries by changing national borders, creating new states or devolving power to new regional authorities. Finally, *compromise* post-violence refers to all of those instances where neither force nor physical separation is possible. Instead, previous combatants are forced to negotiate and reach an accord which involves both a ceasefire and agreement on what constitutes a 'fair' settlement for all parties.

Brewer also suggests that three factors are crucial in determining the shape of and prospects for post-violence peace. First is the extent to which previous adversaries share common values, norms and traditions – what he calls 'relational distance-closeness'. Where previous adversaries are 'relationally close' – as in Northern Ireland – post-violence reconstruction may be easier, as the common shared heritage forms the basis for reorienting people's perspectives. Where relational distance exists – as in Sri Lanka or the Basque region of Spain – it may be necessary to maintain social divisions and to find political ways of managing these to prevent future violence.

Second is whether the previous adversaries live apart or together on common land and share nationality (a 'spatial separation–territorial integrity' axis). In some post-violence societies, especially where there is relational closeness, territorial integrity may not pose insurmountable problems and previous combatants can live side by side. But, in others, the extent of the violence may have been so

damaging as to make spatial separation necessary for a lasting settlement. This has been the outcome in the former Yugoslavia and in the separation of India and Pakistan, for example.

Finally, Brewer notes a third axis of 'cultural capital or cultural annihilation' in post-violence societies. Do former adversaries, particularly those on the losing side, retain their cultural resources and historical memories or have these been effectively annihilated? In some cases, where the vanquished play key economic roles, have access to education or are simply large in number, they may retain their cultural capital, which enables the original causes of the conflict to be kept alive. For example, Palestinians have successfully retained their cultural capital in the conflict with Israel, and black Africans in South Africa maintained their cultural capital in submerged forms during the period of white minority rule. Yet vanquished groups may not be able to resist – as with Australian Aboriginal peoples and North American indigenous groups – and thus face effective 'cultural annihilation'. This does not mean the complete elimination of defeated social groups, but it does point to their cultural subordination in the post-violence situation.

What Brewer's distinctly sociological approach enables is a realistic assessment of the prospects for peace in contemporary conflicts and peace processes around the world. More specifically, it provides a schema that can be used in the study of post-violence peace processes. However, approaches such as this one may also help all of those working within peace processes to understand better some of the obstacles and opportunities they face.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Using Brewer's framework of three types of post-violence society, explore the current situation in Northern Ireland, South Sudan and Afghanistan. Which category do each of these countries fall into? Which of the three cases is most likely to achieve a 'positive peace' and which may have to live with a 'negative peace'?

Terrorism

In the twenty-first century, people around the world have seen terrorist activity and its consequences become part of everyday life. For instance, football supporters are routinely stopped and searched, as are those attending all major events, and a heightened awareness of 'suspicious' behaviour is encouraged in public spaces. The crucial event that sparked this shift took place at about 8.45 a.m. on 11 September 2001, when four commercial aeroplanes in the United States were hijacked by al-Qaeda activists claiming to be acting in defence of Muslims across the world. The planes (belonging to American companies) and the targets – the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the White House – were chosen to strike symbolically at the heart of American economic, military and political power. The attacks became known as '9/11' (the 11th day of the 9th month), and the response of US President George W. Bush was to declare a 'war on terror'.

Although the concept of terrorism has almost become synonymous with the organizational style and activities of al-Qaeda's global network, in fact the latter is atypical when seen against the historical record of terrorist groups. What this record shows is that terrorism can be left-wing, right-wing, religion-inspired or secular. But, before we move on to look at some examples, the first task it to establish exactly what is meant when we use the term 'terrorism'. This has proved to be a contentious issue, even among academics.

What is terrorism?

The word terrorism has its origins in the French Revolution of 1789. Thousands of people – originally aristocrats, but later many more ordinary citizens – were hunted down by the political authorities and executed by guillotine. The term 'terror' was invented not by the revolutionaries themselves but by the counter-revolutionaries: people who despised the French Revolution and what it stood for and who believed that the bloodletting which went on was a form of terrorizing the population (Laqueur 2003). 'Terror', in the sense of the use of

violence to intimidate, was employed extensively in the twentieth century – for example, by the Nazis in Germany and the Russian secret police under Stalin. However, this kind of use of violence also pre-dates the origins of the term in the French Revolution.

Although the word 'terror' was not coined until the eighteenth century, the phenomenon of terrorizing people through violence is a very old one. In ancient civilizations, when one army invaded a city held by the enemy, it was not at all uncommon for the soldiers to raze the entire city to the ground and kill all the men, women and children. The point was not just physically to destroy the enemy but also to create terror in those living in other cities. Clearly, the phenomenon of using violence to terrify populations is older than the term 'terrorism'.

Social scientists disagree not only about the definition of terrorism but also as to whether the concept is useful at all. That is, can it ever be used in a reasonably objective and unbiased way? One issue concerns the shifting moral assessments that people make of terrorism and terrorists. It is often said that 'one person's terrorist is another person's freedom fighter'. Similarly, not all of those with radical beliefs join terror groups and by no means do all of those who do join such groups hold radical beliefs (Crenshaw 2011: 6). Some join for financial gain, others for friendship or to join up and show solidarity with relatives. People who were once terrorists can later come to condemn terrorism just as vehemently as they practised it. It might be argued, for example, that the early history of the Zionist movement was punctuated by terrorist activity; but in the twenty-first century the Israeli leadership declares itself part of the international 'war on terror' and regards terrorists as the enemy. The former South African leader Nelson Mandela was reviled by some Western politicians, particularly in the UK, as a violent terrorist. Yet, today, Mandela is viewed as a major political figure who played a key role in positively transforming the fortunes of South Africa.

A second issue concerns the role of the state. Can states ever be said to practise terrorism, or is 'state terrorism' just a contradiction in terms? States have been responsible for many more deaths than any other type of organization in history, but it is the state itself that most often determines which political groups are to be categorized as terrorists.

States have brutally murdered civilian populations and carried out something comparable to the razing of cities that occurred in traditional civilizations. As we saw earlier, towards the end of the Second World War, systematic fire-bombing by the British RAF and the USAAF largely destroyed the German city of Dresden, where many thousands of civilians were killed. Some historians argue that this action was of no strategic advantage to the Allies and its aim was merely to create terror and fear, weakening the resolve of civilians to carry on the war. Was this an act of state terrorism?

Nonetheless, unless it is restricted to those groups and organizations that work *outside* the state, the concept of terrorism becomes too close to that of war. For our purposes in this section, a pretty good working definition is 'any action [by a non-state organization] … that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such an act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act' (Panyarachun et al. 2004). In other words, terrorism is 'the targeted and intentional use of violence for political purposes' (Vertigans 2008: 3).

One final point to bear in mind is that discussing individual 'terrorists' as a distinct category of person is, in most cases, misleading. It has become common to consider violent political acts committed by individuals as the work of 'lone wolf' terrorists. For example, the right-wing anti-Islam terrorist Anders Breivik killed seventy-seven people in Norway in 2011 and is often referred to as an archetypal 'lone wolf'; he acted entirely alone and published his own 'manifesto' calling for the removal of all Muslims from Europe.

Yet Breivik is not typical of individual terrorist actors, most of whom are alone only during the commission of their violent acts. As one empirical study argues, 'connections to others, be they virtual or physical, play an important, and sometimes even critical role in the adoption and maintenance of their motivation to commit violence, as well as the practical skills that are necessary to carry out acts of terrorism' (Schuurman et al. 2019: 772). This study found that some 78 per cent of lone terrorist actors had external encouragement or justification for their acts, and just under one-third of cases received

practical help from others – from bomb-making knowledge and material to the provision of a 'safe house' after the attack – in their preparation and planning.

Vertigans (2011) argues that a more productive way forward is to recognize that, for most of those who become involved in terrorism, there is a route into terrorist activity (for example, via peer groups, relatives or media messages), activity while within terrorist groups (organizing, recruiting and carrying out actions) and, very often, routes out of terrorism (such as weakening of belief, weariness with violence, forming new friendships outside or the collapse of the terror group itself). Seeing terrorist involvement in this way, as a social process characterized by a series of stages, avoids propagating media stereotypes and offers a genuinely sociological approach to the subject.

Old and new terrorism

Terrorism can be distinguished from the violent acts of previous historical periods, such as the ancient razing of cities. To terrorize populations on a fairly wide spectrum, information about the violence has to reach those populations affected quite quickly, and it was not until the rise of modern communications in the late nineteenth century that this was the case. With the invention of the electronic telegraph, instantaneous communication became possible, transcending time and space. Before this, information could take days or even months to spread. For example, news of Abraham Lincoln's assassination in 1865 took many days to reach the UK. Once instantaneous communication becomes feasible, symbolic acts of terrorist violence can be projected at distance so that it is not just the local population that knows about them (Neumann 2009).

Old terrorism

It is possible to make a distinction between an older and a newer style of terrorism (Laqueur 2000). Old terrorism was dominant for most of the twentieth century and still exists today. This kind is associated mainly with the rise of nationalism and the establishment of nations as

sovereign, territorially bounded entities, which occurred in Europe from the late eighteenth century onwards.

All national boundaries are fixed somewhat arbitrarily, either as lines on a map, as they were by Western colonizers in Africa and Asia, or through conquest, battle and struggle. Ireland, for example, was brought into the United Kingdom in 1800, leading to independence struggles, which resulted in the partition of the country into North and South in the early 1920s. The patchwork of nations mapped out by colonial administrators, or founded by force, has led to numerous nations that do not have their own state – that is, nations with a claim to having a common cultural identity but without the territorial and state apparatus which normally belongs to a nation-state. Much old-style terrorism is linked to nations without states.

The aim of much of the old-style terrorism is to establish states in areas where nations do not have control of the territory's state apparatus. This was true, for example, of Irish nationalists such as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in Sri Lanka, and Basque nationalists, such as ETA in Spain. The main issues are territorial integrity and identity in the formation of a state. Old-style terrorism is found where there are nations without states and where terrorists are prepared to use violence to achieve their ends. Older terrorism is fundamentally local because its ambitions are local. It wants to establish a state in a specific national area. Arguably, Islamic State's activism (see ['Using your sociological imagination' 21.2](#)) is aimed at founding a territorially unbounded state suitable for their interpretation of the 'Muslim nation', though the group's methods comprise a mixture of the old and the contemporary, while their version of 'the nation' includes all Muslims across the world.

In recent years, old-style terrorism has often had an international component, drawing on external support and campaigning for strength. For example, Libya, Syria and some Eastern European countries, as well as groups within the United States, in varying degrees, supported the terrorist acts of the IRA in Northern Ireland and Basque separatists in Spain (Thompson 2015: 46, 395). Although old-style terrorism might involve a wider network of supporters for its funding or in filtering

arms or drugs to buy weaponry, its ambitions are decidedly local or national.

As well as being limited in its ambitions, old-style terrorism is limited in its use of violence. For example, although many people have lost their lives as the result of the conflict in Northern Ireland, the number of people killed as a result of terrorism since the 'Troubles' recommenced in the 1970s, including British soldiers, is on average smaller than those who have died in road accidents. With old-style terrorism, although the numbers of people maimed and killed are significant, the use of violence is limited, because the aims of this kind of terrorism are also relatively limited – fearsome and horrific though this violence still is.

New terrorism

A fundamental distinction can be drawn between old- and new-style terrorism (Tan and Ramakrishna 2002). New terrorism is made possible by the digital revolution that has also driven globalization. This type of terrorism has become intimately associated with the fundamentalist Islamist networks of al-Qaeda and Islamic State (*Daesh*), though it is by no means limited to these groups. Indeed, counterterrorism officers in Britain and politicians in Germany warned that the rising threat posed by right-wing groups was becoming their main concern (Dodd and Grierson 2019). This follows the murder by a lone actor with extreme right-wing beliefs of the British Labour MP Jo Cox during the EU referendum campaign in 2016 and a series of attacks in Germany, including the murder of nine immigrants and ethnic minority Germans in Hannau, near Frankfurt, in February 2020 (*The Economist* 2020a). However, understanding the al-Qaeda network helps us to appreciate why some scholars differentiate the new from the older forms of terrorism.

Al-Qaeda ('the base') was formed in the wake of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989, with Osama bin Laden as its founder and leader. It differs from the tightly knit, militaristic groups of the past, such as the Red Brigades in Italy or the IRA in Northern Ireland, and operates more like a global 'network of networks', broadly in line with Castells's ideas of an emerging network society (Sageman 2004; also

see , 'The Media'). But, within this structure, local groups have a high degree of autonomy. For some, this very loose organizational form suggests that what Western scholars and commentators call 'al-Qaeda' is really more of a shared idea or ideology with similarly shared tactics and methods (Burke 2004).

The new terrorism also differs in its organizational structures. Kaldor (2012) shows that there are similarities between the infrastructure of new terrorist groups and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as Oxfam or Friends of the Earth. Both new terrorist organizations and NGOs are driven by a sense of mission and commitment that allows a fairly loose global organization to flourish (Glasius et al. 2002). Sutton and Vertigans (2006) argue that al-Qaeda exhibits many organizational similarities with the new social movements (NSMs) of the 1970s and 1980s. In particular, its loose forms of organization and transnational networks bear comparison with those of non-violent NSMs such as environmentalism and those against globalization. The extreme violence used by al-Qaeda has often been targeted at highly symbolic sites as a way of demonstrating that the West, and the USA in particular, is weak. Hence, while NSMs have made use of symbolic, non-violent direct actions, al-Qaeda has used symbolic violence to further its cause.

Memorials to the victims of the May 2017 terrorist attack at the Manchester Arena in Manchester. Do the resilient responses to such attacks suggest that urban terrorism is becoming a part of twenty-first-century urban life?

See chapter 20, 'Politics, Government and Social Movements', for more on NSMs.

There is a characteristic tension between modernism and anti-modernism in the worldview of al-Qaeda and similar groups. In attempting to re-establish Islamic dominance of large parts of Europe, the Middle East and Asia, they make extensive use of digital media to criticize modernity and adopt violence to reverse what they see as the moral degeneracy of Western societies (Gray 2003). Some groups not only cause mass casualties but seem much more eager to do so than in

the past (Crenshaw 2011). Al-Qaeda websites, for example, explicitly say that terrorist acts should be carried out which kill as many people as possible, evident in the founding statement of al-Qaeda from 1998:

> The ruling to kill the Americans and their allies – civilians and military – is an individual duty for every Muslim who can do it in any country in which it is possible to do it, in order to liberate the [Muslim holy sites of the] al-Aqsa Mosque and the Holy Mosque [Mecca] from their grip, and in order for their armies to move out of all the lands of Islam, defeated and unable to threaten any Muslim. (Cited in Halliday 2002: 219)

This is very different from the more limited use of violent means characteristic of old-style terrorism, though there are some cases where the two overlap. This can be seen in Chechnya in the former Soviet Union, for example, where a separatist struggle became a recruiting ground for newer forms of terrorist activity as well as in the formation, development and actions of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq.

[USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION](#)

[21.2](#) The rise and fall of Islamic State

In June 2014 a new caliphate – a state governed by Sharia or Islamic law – was declared by the self-styled caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (an alias), leader of militant Islamist group Islamic State (IS).

The caliphate was located in parts of Iraq and Syria, with the intention of establishing a 'lasting and expanding' Islamic state along fundamentalist lines (Lister 2015).

The group was formed in Iraq following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime in the 2003 Gulf War. In 2004 it was allied to Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network and was known as al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). When its leader was killed in 2006, Islamic State in Iraq (ISI) was formed and Baghdadi took over as leader in 2010. He created the al-Nusra Front in Syria and in 2013 merged operations across the two countries, renaming the group Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). ISIL took territory in Iraq, including the cities of Falluja and Mosul, and then became Islamic State (IS) (many Muslims see the group as neither 'Islamic' nor a 'state' and instead often use the name *Daesh,* which carries a negative connotation).

Baghdadi demanded that all militant groups and Muslims swear allegiance to him as caliph (Burke 2015). IS used extreme violence in its military campaigns, killing police and armed forces, religious minorities (such as the Yazidis in Iraq), gay men and so-called apostates, forcing girls and women into sex slavery, beheading Western hostages on camera, and destroying ancient buildings and sites (Byman 2015: 175–7). It also made extensive use of social media and digital technologies to recruit activists. One analyst argues that 'Without digital technology it is highly unlikely that Islamic State would ever have come into existence, let alone been able to survive and expand. This is why I choose to describe the new entity as a "digital caliphate"' (Atwan 2015: 1).

As a Sunni *jihadist* group, IS shares an ideological similarity with al-Qaeda, but there is a clear difference. Al-Qaeda expressly concentrated on terrorizing the 'far enemy' – the USA and Europe – while IS focused on the 'near enemy' – non-Muslims and states in the Middle East – in order to 'purify' Islam in the region from foreign influence. IS also focused on building an unbounded state, spreading outwards from the Middle East. By the end of 2015, the IS advance in Iraq had been halted as US airstrikes enabled Kurdish *peshmerga* fighters to regain some territory. In Syria, a coalition of US-led forces, including France, the UK, Qatar and Australia, targeted IS, degrading resources and preventing further expansion. Russia also hit IS targets, though its main aim was to support President Assad's government against other rebel forces in the Syrian civil war. By the end of 2017, IS had lost 95 per cent of its territory in Iraq and Syria. On 19 December 2018, President Trump declared that IS had been defeated and planned the withdrawal of all 2,000 US troops that had supported the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) (Wilson Center 2019). On 26 October 2019, Baghdadi was killed in a US raid, which brought his short-lived caliphate to an end.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Using this brief vignette as a guide, do some online research into Islamic State. List the key features of its development and operation that fit both ideal types of 'new' and 'old' terrorism. Has this group evolved from the twentieth-century 'new terrorism', or does it mark a return to the older forms?

The contrast between old and new terrorism is best viewed as a contrast between two Weberian ideal types. These are general models constructed from numerous cases to aid sociological investigation. Weber saw ideal types as an important tool for use in identifying and understanding social phenomena, and the contrast between these ideal typical models of terrorism enables a better understanding of how violent political action is changing over time.

Conclusion

The election in 2016 of President Trump, effectively an outsider in relation to the US political establishment, was a shock to political scientists. Similarly, the UK's vote the same year to leave the EU was not forecast and came as a surprise, while the right-wing populist parties in Europe have made much progress. The Fidesz party in Hungary has been in power since 2010, Alternative for Germany (AfD) entered the federal parliament for the first time in 2017, the far-right Vox Party in Spain gained its first seats in parliament in 2019, and similar political developments have occurred in Austria, Sweden, Finland, Estonia, Poland and elsewhere. Crouch (2019a) has described such developments as representing 'an epic struggle between globalization and a resurgent nationalism'.

Crouch argues that this nationalist surge can be seen in majority-Muslim societies, where some feel invaded by external powers and Western cultural products, and among US blue-collar workers, whose industries have lost out as cheaper Chinese steel and manufactured goods dominate global trade. Some British, Austrians and Germans pine for their lost empires and high status, and in many European societies there are fears of 'Islamic' terrorism and the economic and cultural consequences of mass inward migration. On the political left, critics see globalization as favouring wealthy elites, bankers and transnational corporations that traverse the globe in pursuit of profit while trampling on the rights of workers.

Of course, many more feel the benefits of globalizing trends, such as increasing freedom of movement, new work opportunities abroad, and the experience of cultural diversity, even superdiversity, which enriches lives. Yet there is enough evidence today to suggest that nationalism and nation-state identification are rising trends. Despite this, globalizing processes have not gone into reverse. As the digital economy grows, increasing cross-border flows of data, money and services no longer depend on material transport such as shipping containers (Donnan and Leatherby 2019). Similarly, through their digital devices, such as smartphones, billions of people routinely carry

around and engage with cultural products from around the world, and are comfortable with them.

As this chapter has amply illustrated, the period of strong, territorially bounded nation-states, presented as a 'golden age' by nationalist politicians, also produced the most destructive interstate wars and conflicts of the twentieth century. Crouch (2017: 103) notes that 'memories of the appalling consequences of the political use of nationalism in the first half of the twentieth century are fading. Nation is strengthening as a political force, while class and religion … are declining.' As globalization continues to produce uncertainty, change and disruption of the familiar, the main task will be to ensure that its economic benefits are shared more equally in order to assuage a growing perception that only nationalism offers any stability in the form of a clear collective identity.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. What is meant by 'nationalism'? Provide some examples of nationalist movements today and in the past. In an age of globalization, how can we explain the persistence of nationalism and strong national identities?

2. Provide some real-world examples of 'nations without states'. If nations are 'imagined communities', why do they pursue statehood? What advantages does statehood confer?

3. What is meant by 'universal human rights'? Is it paradoxical for such rights to rely on individual nation-states for enforcement?

4. Clausewitz said that war is 'politics by other means'. Do you agree, or is war simply the outgrowth of the primal human urge to aggression? Which position best accounts for the 'total wars' of the twentieth century?

5. What distinguishes 'new wars' from earlier forms? Does the advent of new wars suggest that nation-states are becoming less powerful? What evidence is there that the nation-state remains *the* key political and military actor?

6. Explain what is meant by a 'peace process'? Using examples from the chapter, evaluate Brewer's key concepts for the comparative study of peace processes.

7. In Elias's theory, how is the 'civilizing process' related to nation-states and their formation? Are the 'new wars' and contemporary terrorism evidence that we are entering a period of 'decivilization'? Explain what is meant by this concept.

8. In what ways is genocide different from war? Is genocide really a recent phenomenon or are there historical examples?

9. Provide a working definition of 'terrorism' that 'fits' both violent right-wing activity and the Islamic State group (*Daesh*)?

10. In what ways does the 'new terrorism' differ from old-style terrorism in its scope, organization, structure and methods?

🔎 [Research in practice](#)

Studying violent acts of terrorism has conventionally focused on particular named or self-styled groups and organizations. More recently, the figure of the individual terrorist has emerged, acting alone, perhaps after becoming radicalized via online material and group propaganda. The concept of the 'lone wolf' is widely used and is aimed at capturing this specific type of individualized terrorism. But how useful is this concept in sociology, given that the notion of the self-contained individual runs counter to basic sociological theories of self-formation and the proposition that all action is, in some ways, social?

The paper below takes issue with several key aspects of the lone wolf concept, arguing against its adoption in academic research. Read the paper and address the questions that follow.

Schuurman, B., Lindekilde, L., Malthaner, S., O'Connor, F., Gill, P., and Bouhana, N. (2019) 'End of the Lone Wolf: The Typology that Should Not Have Been', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 42(8): 771–8; doi 10.1080/1057610X.2017.1419554.

1. Describe the research project from which this paper was developed. What kind of research is this?

2. Why do the authors reject the terminology of the 'lone wolf'? What is their alternative?

3. The project looks at elements of 'loneness'. What is meant by this and in what ways is 'loneness' actually profoundly 'social'?

4. What evidence is there in this paper to suggest that online environments play a crucial role in radicalization and the escalation of political violence?

5. The authors argue that shifting focus in the way they suggest has implications for anti-terror policy. How might state policy change if this was adopted?

⚙ **Thinking it through**

The twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a wave of nationalist political movements, some of which have produced nationalist governments that have tried to reshape their societies. A good example is that in Hungary, which, as we saw in the chapter introduction, saw landslide wins in 2010, 2014 and 2018 for Fidesz – a right-wing political party that portrayed its Hungarian nationalism as essentially an independence movement against multinational corporations and the EU, both of which threatened the national identity of the Hungarian people.

The Fidesz government introduced 'non-resident citizenship' in 2010, aimed at binding Hungarians living in neighbouring countries such as Slovakia, Romania and Ukraine, along with the broader diaspora in the USA and Israel, into the transnational 'Hungarian nation'. By 2016, around 780,000 non-resident Hungarians had gained their non-resident citizenship. Why was this new status proving so popular? Are non-resident Hungarians as politically nationalist as residents? Are there pragmatic reasons to apply for non-residential citizenship that are more powerful than nationalist sentiment? Pogonyi's article below explores this issue.

> Pogonyi, S. (2019) 'The Passport as Means of Identity Management: Making and Unmaking Ethnic Boundaries through Citizenship', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 45(6): 975–93.

Read the piece, taking note of the *practical, symbolic* and *social status* advantages conferred on non-residents by taking Hungarian citizenship. Consider how these various aspects interact with the strong nationalist sentiment *within* Hungary. What evidence is there from this article that non-residents are feeling pressure from people within Hungary to gain the new residency status?

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

What is the role of artists both during and after wars that involve their own nations and people? Can artistic works remain 'pure' or 'neutral' on the subject of war and organized killing, or is art in times of war inevitably political? Should it be explicitly political and take a stand?

Read Joanna Bourke's (2018) 'Paintings, Protest and Propaganda: A Visual History of Warfare', which includes some representative artworks: https://edition.cnn.com/style/article/depicting-war-through-art/index.html. This short piece looks at the ways that governments try to use art as part of their war-making apparatus, often employing favoured artists and commissioning work that valorizes the nation and its heroic efforts. It also covers attempts by artists to portray the brutal realities of armed conflict.

Then read Rahel Aima's (2020) review of a recent exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art, which covers the Gulf wars in Kuwait and Iraq between 1991 and 2011: www.artnews.com/art-in-america/aia-reviews/moma-ps1-gulf-wars-1202674304/. This exhibition includes numerous works by Kuwaiti and Iraqi artists who experienced these wars directly, and it asks questions about the role of art in an age of digital technology and 24-hour TV news. Are art and journalism at odds in today's world?

Now, using examples from these two reviews, write a 1,000-word essay on the question 'Should war artists strive for political neutrality?' In particular, consider what art may be able to tell us about the experience of war that goes beyond political propaganda, historical accounts and social scientific theories.

Further reading

An excellent introduction to nationalism is Anthony D. Smith's (2010) *Nationalism* (2nd edn, Cambridge: Polity), as is Claire Sutherland's (2011) *Nationalism in the Twenty-First Century: Challenges and Responses* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan). Both are very good and cover much ground. Theoretical approaches can be found in Umut Özkirimli's (2017) *Theories of Nationalism: A Critical Introduction* (3rd edn, London: Springer Nature). Siniša Malešević's (2019) *Grounded Nationalisms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) is a well-argued sociological account of the persistence of nationalisms.

Mark Frezzo's (2014) *The Sociology of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Polity) and Kate Nash's (2015) *The Political Sociology of Human Rights* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) are excellent introductions to this field.

Sociological research on war is covered in Siniša Malešević's (2010) *The Sociology of War and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), which compares theories of war. Adam Jones's (2017) *Genocide: A Comprehensive Introduction* (3rd edn, London: Routledge) does exactly what it says. Then issues of peace-making can be approached in John D. Brewer's (2010) *Peace Processes: A Sociological Approach* (Cambridge: Polity), which is a stimulating read.

On terrorism, it may be best to begin with a short general text such as Charles Townshend's (2018) *Terrorism: A Very Short Introduction* (3rd edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press). Then the sociological and political arguments on types of terrorism and specific examples can be explored in Stephen Vertigans's (2011) *The Sociology of Terrorism* (Abingdon: Routledge), which takes a much-needed sociological approach. Finally, *The Oxford Handbook of Terrorism* (2019), edited by Erica Chenoweth, Richard English, Andrea Gofas and Stathis N. Kalyvas (Oxford: Oxford University Press), is a very useful resource.

For a collection of original readings on political sociology, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn,

Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

Internet links

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

Internet Modern History at Fordham University, USA – much useful historical material on nationalism:
https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/modsbook17.asp

The State of Nationalism – Reviews the scholarly literature on nationalism and contains many useful resources:
https://stateofnationalism.eu/

The Nationalism Project – a clearing house for scholarly resources on nations and nationalism, including some of the key figures in the field:
www.nationalismproject.org/what.htm

Centre for the History of War and Society, University of Sussex – useful materials on the impact of war on societies:
www.sussex.ac.uk/chws/

The Web Genocide Documentation Centre, based at the University of the West of England – archived resources on genocide, war crimes and episodes of mass killing:
www.phdn.org/archives/www.ess.uwe.ac.uk/genocide/

The MAR Project – monitors conflicts and gathers data on 284 politically active ethnic groups from 1945 to the present:
www.mar.umd.edu/

The Peace Research Institute, Oslo – conducts research into peaceful coexistence between states, people and groups:
www.prio.org

CSTPV – Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, University of St Andrews in Scotland – many links here to terror-related websites and its own journal:
https://cstpv.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk

CTReC – Global Terrorism Research Centre, based at Monash University, Australia – research studies, projects and other resources here:
www.monash.edu/arts/social-sciences/gtrec

CHAPTER 22

CRIME AND DEVIANCE

CONTENTS

In the 2002 movie *Minority Report*, set in the year 2054, a police department in Washington, DC, called 'PreCrime' uses three mutated humans who are able to visualize murders before they actually occur. Police are then able to arrest the perpetrators before they commit their murderous acts. The system is so successful that within six years the murder rate falls to zero. Clearly this is a work of futuristic science fiction. Or is it?

Since 2012, a US private company called PredPol (Predictive Policing) has offered a 'machine-learning algorithm' which uses historical data and is updated daily with new crime events in order to calculate what type of crime is likely to be committed, where and at (roughly) what time period.

The system makes its predictions on a map, identifying high-risk areas and times of day and night, allowing police forces to schedule their officers' patrols more effectively. The algorithm may not be able to predict potential murders, but the firm claims that PredPol can 'predict where and when specific crimes are most likely to occur', so that the

police can patrol those areas 'to prevent those crimes occurring' (https://predpol.com).

PredPol is one of a number of companies making use of big data analytics and artificial intelligence to bring together and analyse very large amounts of data in order to produce practical applications in real-world settings. Given the ongoing digital revolution, it seems highly likely that this kind of system will become more widely adopted. But can the collection and collation of a huge amount of crime data alongside machine learning predictive technology really produce useful information that will help to prevent crimes being committed?

More than sixty police forces in the USA use PredPol, and fourteen police forces in the UK were trialling the technology as of 2018. Some US police chiefs have found the analysis to be accurate at forecasting the places and times that specific offences tend to occur, though others have severe doubts. Policing has long mapped crime 'hot spots' – areas where particular types of crime have occurred – and one analyst suggests that predictive policing is 'not much more accurate than traditional methods … It is enough to help improve deployment decisions, but is far from the popular hype of a computer telling officers where they can go to pick up criminals in the act' (cited in Smith 2018). Yet the novel aspect of this technology is its claimed ability to identify not just where crimes have occurred in the past but, based on the continuous collection and analysis of emerging patterns of crime, where and when they are likely to occur in the next twelve hours.

Should police resources be used on big data analytics or should the focus be on building better relationships through visible community policing?

PredPol's system does not include socio-economic, ethnic or gender information, but critics argue that it still raises issues of possible discriminatory profiling as this information can be embedded within the active data. For example, it seems clear that the current focus is on common types of property and street crime rather than, say, white-collar offences, corporate crimes or, indeed, crimes committed by the police themselves. Enhanced surveillance is most likely to be concentrated on disadvantaged communities in some of the poorest neighbourhoods. In England, the Kent force was the first to adopt predictive policing, in 2013, but in 2018 they scrapped it. Although early results were positive, police chiefs had difficulty proving that crime had been reduced as a direct result of using the software (BBC News 2018b). However, this type of policing technology is in its early stages of development and may become a normal part of policing in the future. Perhaps by 2054?

Technological developments in themselves are unlikely to solve 'the problem of crime', though the quest for simple solutions is, as we shall see, a recurring theme. From biological form to infant personality types and body shapes, the temptation to identify future criminals has proved hard to resist. However, as sociologists we need to take a few steps further back and start by asking what exactly is 'crime'?

The basic concepts

Deviance may be defined as non-conformity to a given set of norms that are accepted by a significant number of people in a community or society. No society can be divided in a simple way between those who deviate from norms and those who conform to them. Most people, most of the time, follow social norms because they are habitually used to doing so. Yet most of us, on occasion, also transgress – or deviate from – generally accepted rules. For example, we may have illegally downloaded music or a film or taken stationery from the workplace, and some may have made prank phone calls in their youth or experimented with illegal drugs. As we will see, sociologists distinguish between these initial acts of primary deviance and secondary deviance, which involves the development of a deviant or criminal identity and, potentially, a criminal 'career'.

Social norms are accompanied by sanctions promoting conformity and discouraging non-conformity. A sanction is any reaction from others to the behaviour of an individual or group that is meant to ensure compliance with a given norm. Sanctions may be positive (offering rewards) or negative (punishing behaviour that does not conform) and can be levied informally or formally. *Informal sanctions* are less organized, more spontaneous reactions to non-conformity. A studious pupil who is teased by classmates for being a 'nerd' when they refuse to go out clubbing experiences an informal sanction. Informal sanctions might also occur when an individual who makes a sexist or racist comment is met with disapproving responses from friends or work colleagues.

Formal sanctions are applied by a specific body of people or an agency to ensure that a particular set of norms is followed. The main types of formal sanction in modern societies are those represented by the police, courts and prisons. A law is a formal sanction defined by government as a rule or principle that its citizens must follow. But many forms of deviance are not sanctioned by law, and studies of deviance investigate phenomena as diverse as naturism, 1990s rave culture and the lifestyles of 'New Age' travellers.

Deviance and crime are not synonymous, though in many cases they overlap. The concept of crime conventionally refers only to actions or omissions that break the law and are punishable by the state. This may seem so obvious as to require no comment. However, Reiner (2016: 4) argues that crime is an 'essentially contested concept'. This is because there are normative judgements of what should and should not be considered crimes, but also because we all break the law on occasion and yet do not believe we should be punished. For example, many people break speed limits or use their phones while driving *without* perceiving themselves as 'criminals'. On the other hand, some feel strongly that currently legal activities, such as involvement in tenacious tax avoidance schemes or risky banking investment practices, *should* be covered by the criminal law and that those involved ought to be punished accordingly.

The concept of criminalization helps to explain why some activities become the subject of criminal justice while others do not. This concept is fundamental to the study of patterns of crime. When a social group or certain activities are targeted for intensified monitoring, redefinition and, ultimately, prosecution, this process is known as criminalization. For example, stalking, hate crime and knowingly passing on HIV have all undergone criminalization. In recent years, internet piracy has come under increasing scrutiny and monitoring, while some types of antisocial behaviour have also been criminalized (Croall 2011: 5).

Two distinct but related social science disciplines study crime and deviance. Criminology is 'the scientific study of crime', though this is rather general. Criminology is actually a multidisciplinary enterprise taking in contributions from sociology, psychology, history, legal studies and more. Newburn (2017: 6) suggests that Edwin Sutherland's early definition of criminology remains relevant – that is, 'the study of the making of laws, the breaking of laws, and of society's reaction to the

breaking of laws'. Criminologists are interested in techniques for measuring crime, trends in crime rates, and policies aimed at reducing crime.

The annual 'Tomatina' festival in Buñol in Spain is a huge tomato fight in the town centre. While clearly a deviant form of behaviour, it is promoted by the authorities as a local tradition and tourist attraction.

The [sociology of deviance](#) draws on criminological research but also investigates conduct which lies outside the criminal law. Sociologists studying deviance seek to understand *why* certain actions are regarded as deviant in the first place and how the concepts of deviance and normality are socially constructed. The study of deviance directs our attention to issues of power, the influence of social class, and divisions between rich and poor and always raises the question 'who makes the rules?'

Theories of crime and deviance

Before the discipline of sociology was well established, theories of crime and criminality were rooted in ideas of criminal personalities and human biology. One notable example is the Italian scientist Cesare Lombroso, whose book *L'uomo delinquente* (1876) ('Criminal man'), argued that criminal types *could* be identified by their visible, anatomical features. Lombroso investigated the physical characteristics of convicted criminals in prisons, such as the shape of the skull and forehead, jaw size and arm length, as well as skin markings such as tattoos. He concluded that criminals displayed clear signs of atavism – traits from earlier stages of human evolution – which 'civilized' human beings did not. Criminals were essentially uncivilized, evolutionary throwbacks and, as their criminality was inherited, they could not be held responsible for their actions. Critics attacked Lombroso's work for its lack of reliable evidence and questionable methodology, but at the time it was actually innovative, as the author insisted that crime could and should be studied in a systematic manner – the basis for the discipline of criminology.

In the mid-twentieth century, Sheldon's (1949) theory of 'somatotypes' distinguished three main types of human physique, each linked to individual personality type, one of which was associated with delinquency and crime. Muscular active types (mesomorphs) tend to be more physical and aggressive, which means they are more likely to become delinquent than those of thin physique (ectomorphs) or more round, fleshy people (endomorphs). Sheldon also used photographs of some 4,000 young men, comparing their body shapes. His critics argued that, even if there was a correlation between bodily type and delinquency, this would not necessarily show that heredity was the determining influence. People of the muscular type may be drawn towards criminal activities because these offer opportunities for the physical display of their athleticism. There is no decisive evidence that any traits of personality are inherited in this way, and, even if they were, their connection to criminality would be distant at best.
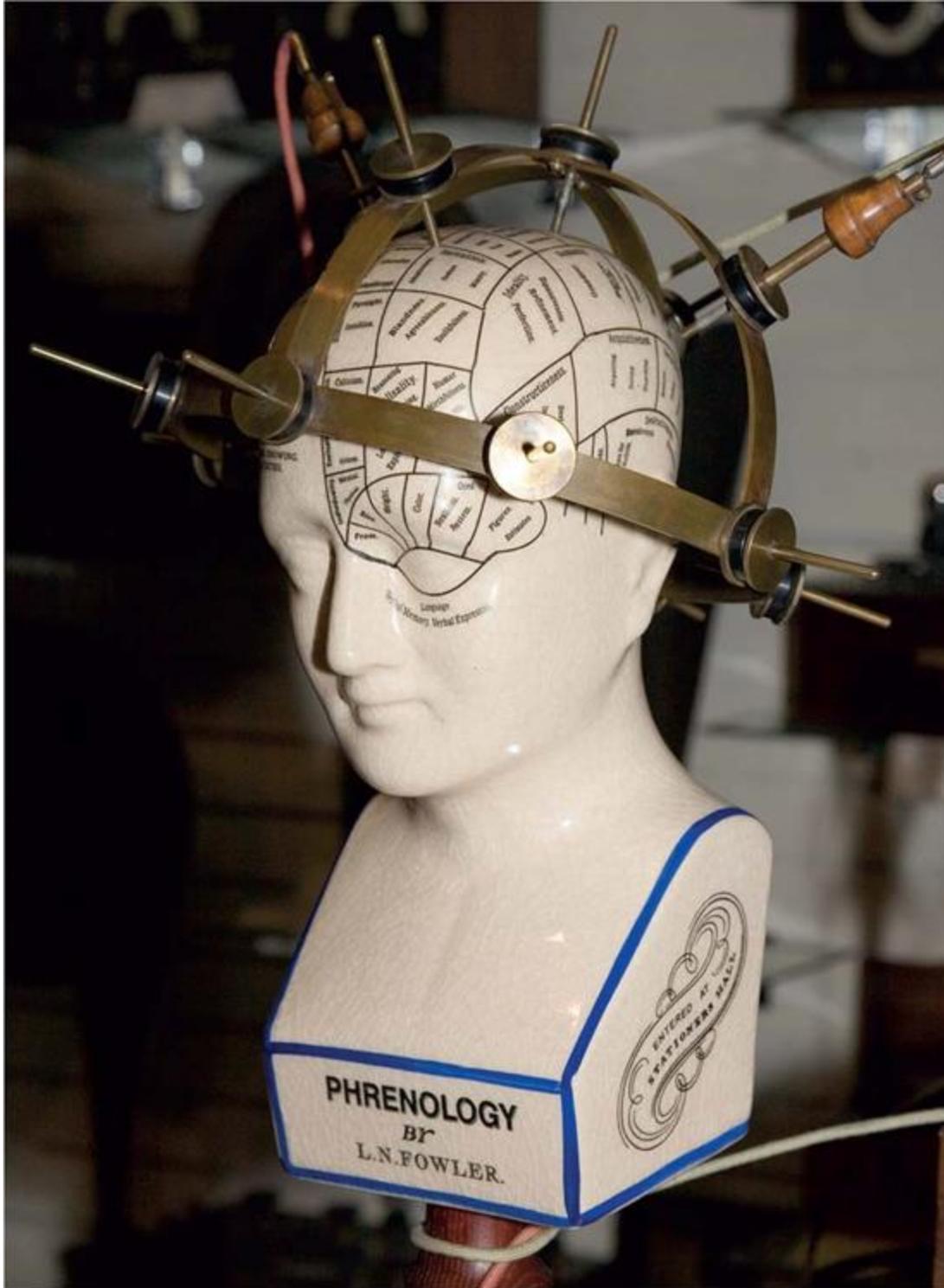
Phrenology involves measuring the shape of the skull in the assessment of personality traits.

Even today, scientists can be attracted to biological causation. In 2011, researchers argued that their analysis of twin studies suggested that criminal tendencies exist in children as young as four years old as a result of an abnormal brain make-up. 'Callous unemotional traits' could be identified in very young infants which could predict future adult criminality. Early screening may therefore offer the possibility of interventions such as drugs to boost the brain. One researcher said, 'I believe we have to pursue the causes of crime at a biological and genetic level as well as at a social' (cited in Alleyne 2011). Raine (2014) also argued that sociological theories of crime are not enough, particularly in the explanation of violent crime, and that there exists a biological basis of such criminality. He proposed that recent advances in neuroscience and behavioural genetics can be combined into a new discipline called neurocriminology, which would adopt 'the principles and techniques of neuroscience to understand the origins of anti-social behavior' (ibid.: 8).

Biological and individualistic psychological approaches presume that crime and deviance are signs of something 'wrong' within the individual person. By contrast, sociologists begin from the premise that any satisfactory account of the nature of crime must take account of how some actions come to be categorized as 'crimes' in the first place. In the sociology of crime and deviance, no single theory is dominant, and diverse theoretical perspectives remain relevant and useful today. Four sociological approaches have been particularly influential: *functionalist theories, interactionist theories, conflict theories* and *control theories*.

Functions and dysfunctions of crime

Functionalist theories see crime and deviance resulting from structural tensions and a lack of moral regulation within society. If the aspirations of individuals and groups do not coincide with society's stock of available rewards, then a disparity between desires and their fulfilment will be expressed in the deviant motivations of some social groups.

Crime and anomie: Durkheim and Merton

The concept of <u>anomie</u> was first used by Emile Durkheim to describe the erosion of traditional norms in modern societies. Anomie occurs when there are no clear standards to guide behaviour, leading to deep feelings of disorientation and anxiety. In the modern world people are less constrained than in previous times and, because there is more room for individual choice, it is inevitable there will be non-conformity or deviance.

It would be a good idea at this point to refer back to <u>chapter 1</u>, 'What is Sociology?', and <u>chapter 3</u>, 'Theories and Perspectives', which cover Durkheim's ideas and twentieth-century functionalism.

Durkheim went further. He claimed that deviance is actually necessary for society, as it fulfils two important functions. First, deviance has an *adaptive* function; it can introduce new ideas and challenges into society and can therefore be an innovative force, bringing about social and cultural change. Second, deviance promotes *boundary maintenance* between 'good' and 'bad' behaviours. A deviant act can provoke a collective response that heightens in-group solidarity and clarifies social norms.

Although Durkheim is considered a typically 'conservative' functionalist thinker, we should remember that his ideas were crucial in pointing out the limits of individualistic explanations and thus the need for genuinely sociological studies of social forces and relations. Durkheim's ideas on crime and deviance were considered radical at the time, as they ran against the grain of conservative opinion. Indeed, even today his suggestion that a certain amount of deviance and crime may be functional and socially useful remains politically controversial.

Normalizing deviance

Durkheim argued that deviance has an important part to play in a well-ordered society because, by defining what is deviant, we become aware

of what is not deviant and thereby learn the shared standards of society. Rather than eliminating deviance completely, it is more likely that an orderly social life requires the level of deviance to be kept within acceptable limits to avoid its becoming dysfunctional for society. But how do authorities act when those acceptable levels are exceeded?

In the 1990s, Moynihan (1993) argued that crime and deviance in the USA actually *had* increased beyond the point that society could accept. Yet, rather than strengthening the agencies of social control to bring levels down, deviance was simply redefined, and previously 'deviant' behaviours became 'normalized'. One example was the [deinstitutionalization](#) of mental health patients that began in the 1950s.

At that time, mental illness was seen as a form of social deviance, and those with severe conditions were placed in psychiatric institutions for diagnosis and treatment. The initiative towards moving people out of these clinical, and often hated, settings (deinstitutionalization) was seen as a positive development and the number of recognized psychiatric patients in New York fell from 93,000 in 1955 to just 11,000 by 1992. Yet many people with mental health issues were instead treated with tranquillizers and then released into the community, where many former patients became homeless, sleeping rough across the city without proper treatment, help or supervision. People with mental health issues were effectively redefined as 'people lacking housing', which reduced official levels of mental ill health in society and contributed to the misplaced notion that mental illness was not a widespread phenomenon.

At the same time, the 'normal' or acceptable level of crime had risen. Moynihan (1993) pointed out that, after the St Valentine's Day massacre in 1929, in which seven gangsters were murdered, the public and government were outraged. However, in the 1990s the number of murders in the USA was much higher than in the 1920s, yet they provoked barely any reaction at all. Moynihan also saw the under-reporting of crime as another way in which it becomes 'normalized'. Durkheim's functionalist argument that there exists a certain acceptable level of deviance may therefore be incorrect. What constitutes deviance is socially constructed, highly fluid and changes over time.

An attempt to update Durkheim's ideas on crime for the mid-twentieth century was Robert Merton's analysis of class and crime in the USA. Adapting the concept of anomie, Merton showed that America's self-image as a relatively open, meritocratic and classless society was far from accurate. This study is discussed in detail in 'Classic studies' 22.1.

Following Merton's work, Albert Cohen also saw contradictions within American society as the main structural cause of acquisitive crime, but, while Merton emphasized individual adaptive responses, Cohen saw the latter as occurring collectively through the formation of subcultures. In *Delinquent Boys* (1955), he argued that boys in the lower working class, who are frustrated with their position in life, often join together in delinquent subcultures, such as gangs. These subcultures reject middle-class values, replacing them with norms that celebrate defiance and acts of non-conformity, and we still see this process of gang formation today.

Evaluation

Functionalist theories rightly emphasize the links between conformity and deviance in different social contexts. Lack of opportunity can be a key factor differentiating those who engage in criminal behaviour from those who do not. But we should be cautious about the idea that people in poorer communities aspire to the same level of success as more affluent groups. Most people tend to adjust their aspirations to what they see as the reality of their situation, and only a minority ever turn to crime. It would also be wrong to suppose that a mismatch of aspirations and opportunities is confined to the less well-off. There are many opportunities for criminal activity among middle-class and wealthier groups too, as evidenced by the 'white-collar crimes' of embezzlement, fraud, tax evasion and more, which we deal with later in the chapter.

Interactionist perspectives

Sociologists working from an interactionist perspective focus on the social construction of crime and deviance, rejecting the notion that there are types of conduct that are inherently or objectively 'deviant'.

Interactionists ask how such behaviours come to be defined as deviant and why certain groups and not others are likely to be labelled as such. The concept of criminalization was devised by criminologists to capture these processes of definition and redefinition.

[Classic studies 22.1](#) Robert Merton and the failing American dream

The research problem

Why have crime rates remained relatively high in the developed societies? Does increasing affluence lead to less criminality? To answer these questions, the American sociologist Robert K. Merton (1957) used Durkheim's concept of anomie to construct an influential theory which located the sources of crime within the social structure of American society. Merton tried to explain a well-established observation from official statistics at the time, that a high proportion of crimes for immediate financial gain are committed by the 'lower working class' – those from manual, blue-collar families. Why should this be so?

Merton's explanation

Merton used the concept of 'anomie' to describe the *strain* which occurs when widely accepted cultural values conflict with people's lived reality. In American society – and, by extension, in similarly developed countries – generally held values emphasize material success, achieved through self-discipline, education and hard work. Accordingly, people who work hard can succeed no matter what their starting point in life – an idea known as 'the American dream', an idea that has proved attractive to many immigrant groups.

Yet Merton argued that, for many social groups, it really is just a dream, because disadvantaged groups have limited or no conventional opportunities for advancement. But those who do not 'succeed' find themselves condemned for their inability to make material progress. In this situation, there is great pressure or 'strain' to get ahead by any means. Deviance and crime are then the products of the strain between cultural values and the unequal distribution of legitimate opportunities.

Merton identified five possible responses to this strain (see [table 22.1](#)). *Conformists* accept both generally held values and the

conventional means for realizing them; a majority of the population fall into this category. *Innovators* also accept socially approved values but, finding legitimate avenues blocked, turn to illegitimate means to follow them. Criminals who acquire wealth through illegal activities exemplify this type. *Ritualists* conform to social values despite not being particularly successful, following the rules purely for their own sake. Someone who dedicates themselves to a boring job, even though it has no career prospects and few rewards, is an example. *Retreatists* have abandoned the values and the legitimate means, effectively 'dropping out' of mainstream society. Finally, *rebels* reject both the existing values and legitimate means but, instead of dropping out, work actively to transform the system and institute new values. Members of radical political groups fall into this category.

Merton's scheme is designed to capture some of the main responses of social groups to their differing location in the social structure. In particular, it suggests a deeply felt relative deprivation among 'lower-working-class' groups, which explains their over-representation in the prison population.

Critical points

Critics point out that, in focusing on individual responses, Merton failed to appreciate the significance of subcultures in sustaining deviant behaviour, an omission he later sought to rectify in his work on reference groups. His reliance on official statistics is also problematic, because they are inevitably partial and may tell us more about the process of collection than the true extent of crime (see the discussion of crime statistics later in the chapter). Merton's thesis also overestimates the amount of 'lower-working-class' criminality, implying that everyone in this class fraction should experience the strain towards crime. But, as the majority never become involved in crime, we have to ask, why not? Conversely, the model underestimates middle-class crime. More recent research has found unexpectedly high levels of white-collar and corporate crime, which is not predicted by Merton's model.

Table 22.1 Adaptive responses to social strain

	Approved values	*means*
Conformity	+	+
Innovation (crime)	+	−
Ritualism	−	+
Retreatism	−	−
Rebellion	replacement	replacement

Contemporary significance

Merton's study retains its significance because it addresses a central research problem: when societies are becoming more affluent, why does acquisitive crime (for financial or material gain) not fall? In emphasizing the social strain between rising aspirations and persistent structural social inequalities, Merton points to *relative* deprivation among manual working-class groups as an important motivator for rule breaking. His research was also an effective sociological critique of biological and psychological explanations of crime and deviance. He shows that individual choices and motivations are always made within a wider social context, which shapes them according to the differential opportunities available to social groups.

The idea of relative deprivation is discussed in chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

Labelling perspectives

One of the most important interactionist approaches has been the labelling perspective. Labelling theorists interpret deviance as the product of interaction processes between deviants and non-deviants. Therefore, if we are to understand the nature of deviance, we must discover why some people come to be tagged with a 'deviant' label.

Labelling processes tend to express the power structure of society. By and large, the rules in terms of which deviance is defined are framed by the wealthy for the poor, by men for women, by older people for younger people, and by ethnic majorities for minority ethnic groups. A simple example is that many young university students experiment with legal and illegal drugs, which is accepted by authorities as a 'normal' part of the move into adulthood. However, the use of drugs by young people on a deprived, inner-city housing estate may be viewed as evidence of their delinquency and future criminality. The primary act is the same, but it is assigned different meanings depending on the context.

Becker's (1963) work showed how deviant identities are produced through labelling processes rather than deviant or criminal motivations. Becker argued that 'deviant behaviour is simply behaviour that people so label.' He was highly critical of criminological approaches that drew a clear distinction between 'normal' and 'deviant'. For Becker, deviant behaviour is not the determining factor in why people take on the identity of a 'deviant'. Rather, there are social processes which are more influential. A person's dress, manner of speaking or country of origin could all be key factors determining whether or not a deviant label is applied.

[Labelling theory](#) came to be associated with Becker's (1963) early studies of marijuana smokers. In the early 1960s, smoking marijuana was a marginal activity within subcultural groups. Becker found that becoming a marijuana smoker depended on acceptance into the subculture through close association with experienced users, who taught new members how to use and how to enjoy the drug and adopt in-group attitudes towards non-users. Becoming a marijuana smoker was not simply dependent on the objective act of smoking but involved interactions within a subculture.

Labelling not only affects how others perceive an individual, it also influences that individual's self-identity. Edwin Lemert (1972) devised a model for understanding how deviance can coexist with or actually become central to one's identity. He argued that, contrary to common-sense ideas, deviance is actually quite commonplace and most people get away with it. Traffic violations rarely come to light and small-scale theft is often tolerated or 'overlooked', for example.

"We find that all of us, as a society, are to blame, but only the defendant is guilty."

Lemert called these initial acts of transgression primary deviance. In most cases, these acts remain 'marginal' to the person's self-identity

and the deviant act becomes normalized. But in other cases normalization does not occur and the person is labelled a criminal or deviant. Lemert used the term secondary deviance to describe the cases where individuals come to accept the deviant label for themselves. The new label can then become a master status, overriding all other indicators of status, leading to a continuation or intensification of their primary deviant behaviour.

The process of 'learning to be deviant' can be accentuated by prisons and other control agencies, the very organizations charged with correcting deviant behaviour. For labelling theorists, this is a clear demonstration of the 'paradox of social control', described by Wilkins (1964) as deviancy amplification. This refers to the unintended consequence of an agency of control provoking more of the deviant behaviour it set out to reduce. For instance, common criminal terms such as 'thief' or 'drug dealer', which may be used routinely throughout the criminal justice process, can have an impact on how young people at a formative age come to see themselves. They may then incorporate that label into their identity, leading to secondary deviance, more responses from agencies of control and the crystallizing of their deviant identity. The label also affects employers, who may be less likely to offer employment, and peers, who may not want to be associated with those labelled 'deviant' or 'criminal'. In other words, the behaviour that was seen as undesirable becomes more prevalent and those labelled as deviant become more, not less, resistant to change.

Longitudinal studies of the development of 'criminal careers' have led to an increasing focus on early interventions with children and young people. These aim to tackle a series of risk factors for offending in order to prevent the development of extended secondary deviance. Farrington (2003: 2) argues that the typical age at the onset of offending is between eight and fourteen, and early onset is a good predictor of a long criminal career. Early interventions may be able to prevent young people from taking this first step. Farrington and Welsh (2007: 4) report that there is good evidence that pre-school enrichment programmes, child skills training and parental education schemes can be effective in preventing later offending.

Classic studies 22.2 Stan Cohen's folk devils and moral panics

The research problem

Youth subcultures can be colourful, spectacular and quite alarming. But how are they created and how do societies react to youthful creativity? The process of *deviancy amplification* was examined in a highly influential study conducted by Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, originally published in 1972. Cohen examined labelling processes in relation to the emergence and control of youth cultures in the UK. As a young postgraduate student, he observed some minor clashes between 'Mods' and 'Rockers' in the seaside town of Clacton in 1964, but he could not reconcile what he saw with newspaper reports the following day. Had he just missed the violence they reported or was there another explanation?

Cohen's explanation

Lurid newspaper headlines, such as 'Day of Terror by Scooter Groups' and 'Wild Ones Invade the Seaside', described the young people at Clacton as 'out of control'. Though Cohen says this was wide of the mark, the tone was set. In carefully sifting the documentary evidence from newspapers, court reports and arrest records, Cohen reconstructed the events at Clacton, showing that, apart from a few minor skirmishes, nothing out of the ordinary had happened. In fact, far worse disturbances had occurred in the years before the Mods and Rockers emerged. In presenting young people's activities in a sensationalist way, the press contributed to a climate of fear and a panic that society's moral rules were under threat.

Attempts to control youth subcultures in the UK during the 1960s succeeded in drawing attention to them and made them more popular. The process of labelling a group as *outsiders* – or 'folk devils' – in an attempt to control them, backfired. Future seaside gatherings attracted much larger crowds, including some youths just looking for a fight, potentially creating larger problems for law

enforcement – a classic instance of the paradox of social control. Exaggerated media coverage was part of a new [moral panic](#) – a concept used by sociologists to describe societal over-reaction towards a certain social group or type of behaviour. Moral panics often emerge around public issues that are taken as symptomatic of general social disorder.

Critical points

Critics claim that the main problem with the theory was how to differentiate between an exaggerated moral panic and a serious social problem. For example, would the societal response to a series of terrorist acts be part of a moral panic, or is this so serious that extensive media coverage and new laws are appropriate? Where does the boundary lie between an unnecessary panic and a legitimate response? Similarly, in diverse, multicultural societies, are there still such clearly defined shared values that delineate normal from deviant behaviour? A further criticism is that, in recent years, persistent moral panics have arisen over matters such as 'welfare scroungers', immigration, and youthful crime and drug use. This has led some to argue that moral panics are no longer confined to short bursts of intense activity but are chronic features of everyday life in modern societies and, as such, have become 'institutionalized'.

Contemporary significance

Cohen's early study is particularly important because it successfully combined theories of deviant labelling with ideas of social control and the creation of deviant identities. In doing so, it created the framework for a productive research agenda in the sociology of deviance which has shed light on moral panics around 'black criminality', welfare 'scroungers', refugees and asylum-seekers, young people's drug use and much more (Cohen 2003 [1972]; Marsh and Melville 2011). Cohen's study also reminds us that, as sociologists, we cannot take events at face value or accept journalists' reports as accurate. Instead, if we are better to understand societies and social processes, we have to dig beneath the surface.

Evaluation

Labelling perspectives are important because they begin from the assumption that no act is intrinsically 'deviant' but becomes so through the formulation of laws and their interpretation by police, courts and correctional institutions. Yet critics of labelling argue that certain acts – such as killing others, rape and robbery – *are* universally and consistently prohibited across all societies and are not subject to processes of definition and redefinition. But is this correct? Killing, for example, is not always regarded as murder. In times of war, killing the enemy is positively approved of and rewarded. Similarly, until the second half of the twentieth century, laws in much of Europe and North America did not recognize sexual intercourse forced on a woman by her husband as 'rape', though it is now recognized as such in the criminal code.

We can criticize labelling on more convincing grounds. First, in focusing on secondary deviance, labelling theorists downplay the significance and fail adequately to explain acts of primary deviance. The labelling of actions as deviant is not completely arbitrary; differences in socialization, attitudes and opportunities all influence how far people are likely to engage in behaviour branded as deviant or criminal. Second, it is not clear whether labelling really does have the effect of increasing deviant conduct. Deviant behaviour tends to escalate following conviction, but is this the result of labelling? Other factors, such as interaction with other offenders or learning about new criminal opportunities, may also be involved. Nonetheless, although it is not a

comprehensive account, the labelling perspective remains one part of any satisfactory explanation of why deviant identities are adopted.

Conflict theories

An early example of conflict theory in the study of crime was the work of the Dutch sociologist Willem Bonger (2019 [1905]), which was influenced by Marxist theory. He produced systematic critiques of all theories of criminality which saw the causes of crime as residing within the individual and, instead, developed the argument that the structure of inequality within capitalist economies weakens key social institutions, such as the family, and promotes egoism while eroding altruism. Yet it was much later in the second half of the twentieth century that Marxist approaches to crime began to reach mainstream sociology and criminology.

Publication of *The New Criminology* marked an important break with earlier theories of crime and deviance. Taylor, Walton and Young (1973) drew on Marxist theory, arguing that deviance is deliberately chosen and often political in nature and rejecting the idea that it is 'determined' by biology, personality, anomie, social disorganization or labelling. People actively choose to engage in deviant behaviour as a response to the inequalities of the capitalist system. Thus, members of counter-cultural groups regarded as 'deviant' – such as the Black Power or gay liberation movements – were engaging in political acts which challenged the existing social order. Theorists of this new criminology framed their analysis in terms of the structure of society and the protection of ruling class power, aiming to produce a 'fully social theory' of crime.

This broadly Marxist perspective was further developed by others. Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the UK carried out an important study of the apparently new offence of 'mugging' in the 1970s. In fact, mugging was a term used by newspapers to describe street robberies with the threat of violence. Several high-profile muggings were publicized in the mass media, fuelling widespread popular concerns of an explosion of violent street crime. Muggers were overwhelmingly

portrayed as young black men, contributing to the view that immigrants were responsible for a breakdown in society.

Hall and his colleagues (1978) maintained that the criminalization of young black men was a moral panic, encouraged by the state and mass media to deflect attention from rising unemployment, declining wages and other deep structural flaws within society. As we will see later, a notable feature of the patterning of crime and deviance is that some social groups, such as young people within black and South Asian communities, are more likely to be victims of crime, or seen as a social problem, than others. Around the same time, other conflict criminologists argued that laws are tools used by the powerful to maintain their own privileged position. As inequalities increase between the ruling class and the working class, law becomes a more important instrument which the powerful use to maintain order. This dynamic could be seen in the workings of the criminal justice system, which had become more oppressive towards working-class 'offenders', or in tax legislation, which disproportionately favoured the wealthy.

Powerful individuals also break laws, but they are rarely monitored, caught and punished. Corporate crime, for example, is arguably far more economically harmful than the everyday crime and delinquency which attracts most attention. But, fearful of the difficulty and implications of pursuing corporate offenders, law-enforcement agencies focus their efforts on less powerful members of society, such as prostitutes, drug users and petty thieves (Pearce 1976; Chambliss 1978; Box 1983). In short, powerful groups are able to resist being criminalized as a result of their deviant activities.

These studies and others associated with the 'new criminology' were important in widening the debate about crime and deviance to include questions of relative harm, social justice, power and politics. They emphasized that crime occurs at all levels of society and must be understood in the context of inequalities and competing interests. Indeed, the new criminology led to a new sub-field known as zemiology – the study of social harm – focused on economic and social inequalities and their damaging impact (Boukli and Kotzé 2018). For scholars working within this perspective, social harm is of greater significance than commonly prosecuted crimes or deviance (Hillyard et al. 2004).

Left Realism

By the 1980s, partly in response to perceived inadequacies of the new criminology, a perspective emerged which became known as 'New Left Realism' or just 'Left Realism'. Left Realism drew on ideas from the new criminology, but proponents distanced themselves from so-called left idealists, whom they saw as romanticizing deviance as a form of working-class rebellion. For Left Realists, crime is a real problem that is especially harmful to working-class communities. Its significance should not be downplayed. Many criminologists on the political left had tended to minimize the use of official crime statistics, as these were not reliable and could be used by the mass media to scapegoat working-class youth and minority ethnic groups.

Left Realists did not agree. They emphasized that there was reliable evidence that crime *had* increased and the public was right to be concerned. Hence, criminologists had to engage with the 'real' issues of criminality, crime control and social policy (Lea and Young 1984; Matthews and Young 1986). In particular, they were interested in the victims of crime, not just perpetrators, arguing that victim surveys provide a more valid picture than police-recorded crime statistics (D. J. Evans 1992). Successive victim surveys revealed that crime was indeed a serious problem, particularly in impoverished inner-city areas. Left Realists pointed out that rates of crime and victimization were concentrated in marginalized neighbourhoods and that poorer social groups were at a much greater risk of becoming victims of crime than the wealthy.

Left Realism draws on Merton's work on social strain and subcultural theories, suggesting that criminal subcultures develop in the inner cities. However, these do not derive directly from conditions of poverty

but from political marginalization and relative deprivation, the experience of being deprived of things to which they are entitled. Since the 1990s these ideas have often been discussed via the concept of social exclusion. Both are processes that operate effectively to deny some social groups their full citizenship. Criminalized youth groups, for example, operate at the margins of 'respectable society' and pit themselves against it. The fact that rates of crime carried out by black youths had risen was attributed to the fact that policies of racial integration had failed.

Left Realists emphasize the real and very harmful effects of crime on the lives of the poorest people and communities in society.

The ideas of relative deprivation and social exclusion are discussed in chapter 11, 'Poverty, Social Exclusion and Welfare'.

Left Realists made some 'realistic' proposals for changes in policing to make law enforcement more responsive to communities rather than relying on 'military' techniques which reduced public support for the police. They proposed a 'minimal policing' policy and argued for locally elected police authorities to have a larger say in setting priorities for their area. Furthermore, by spending more time investigating and clearing up crimes and less time on routine administration, the police could regain the trust of their local community. On the whole, Left Realism represents a more pragmatic and policy-oriented approach to crime than many of the criminological perspectives which preceded it.

While many criminologists accept the importance placed on victimization, the focus on individual victims in political and media-driven discussions of 'the crime problem' has been criticized as too narrow. The focus on only the most visible forms of crime, such as street crimes, also neglects other offences, such as those carried out by the state or large corporations that are not so visible (Walton and Young 1998). In this sense, many Marxists argued that Left Realism concedes too much ground to mainstream criminology and fails to generate a radically new approach, such as that of the new criminology.

The development of feminist theories has had a major impact on research in this field, and these generally fall within the broad category of 'conflict theories'. In particular, feminist research explores the gendered pattern of crime and deviance and the ways in which social norms of masculinity and femininity impact on the operation of the criminal justice system. As we have included an extended discussion of 'gender and crime' later in the chapter, feminist theorizing is embedded within that section rather than being incorporated below as an example of conflict theory.

Controlling crime

There have been numerous theories which focus on identifying factors that militate against people committing crimes. These control theories view criminal actions as the result of an imbalance between the impulse towards criminality and the social or physical controls that deter it. Control theorists are interested less in individual motivations,

because they assume that people act rationally and instrumentally, so if crime would be beneficial, given the opportunity, most people would engage in it. Many types of crime, it is argued, are the result of these 'situational decisions', when a person sees an opportunity and takes advantage of it.

An early theorist, Travis Hirschi (1969), argued that humans are fundamentally selfish beings who make calculated decisions by weighing the potential benefits against the risks. But his focus was on what binds people into social life and 'immunizes' them against criminality. Hirschi proposed four types of social bond linking people to society and to law-abiding behaviour: attachment (to parents, peers and institutions), commitment (to conventional lifestyles), involvement (in mainstream activities) and beliefs (respect for the law and authority). When sufficiently strong, these bonds help to maintain social control by tying people into conforming behaviour. But if these bonds are weak, delinquency and crime may result. Hirschi's approach suggests that criminals are often individuals with low levels of self-control as a result of inadequate socialization processes (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990).

Hirschi's control theory asks why people do *not* break the law rather than why they do. Talcott Parsons (1937) had already provided a sociological answer: most people conform positively; they actually *want* to be law-abiding citizens as a consequence of socialization and the desire for sociability. Tyler (2006) fleshed out this idea through empirical research in the USA, arguing that compliance with laws is closely related to personal morality and a perception that the law is legitimate. Individuals may evaluate each law according to their personal moral code and will obey those laws which accord with that morality but not ones that do not. Many middle-class people are generally law-abiding, but some also use cannabis and cocaine, break the speed limit on motorways or fiddle their expense claims at work. They do these things because they do not see them as 'immoral'. At the same time, they castigate others who shoplift or spray graffiti in public places as criminals lacking a moral code.

On the other hand, people may obey the law because they believe that law-making and enforcing bodies are legitimate and have the right to

enforce the law. Where this is the case, people tend to obey all the laws. But Tyler also notes that negative experiences with the police or courts – such as young black men being repeatedly stopped and searched – may change attitudes to the legitimacy of the authorities. In both cases – compliance via personal morality and compliance via legitimacy – people obey laws because of their internalized norms of fairness and justice, *not* because they fear punishment. This 'procedural justice' perspective means that, even when people disagree with particular decisions or outcomes, provided the procedures used are seen as just, then the authorities retain their legitimacy.

Tyler's research suggests that lengthening jail sentences or sending more young people to prison will most likely not prevent future offending. What authorities could do is ensure that the procedures used in the criminal justice system operate in ways that are just, which would sustain respect for the law. However, starting from the 1980s, an alternative perspective has also developed, concentrating on individual and familial morality and seeking to tackle crime by strengthening policing and taking a harder line on sentencing. This approach is known as 'Right(-wing) Realism'.

Right Realism

The late 1970s election successes of Margaret Thatcher in Britain and Ronald Reagan in the USA led to vigorous 'law-and-order' approaches to crime in both countries, often described as Right Realism. This approach saw the perceived escalation of crime and delinquency as due to moral degeneracy and the decline of individual responsibility, both linked to welfare dependency and liberal education, the decentring of the nuclear family model and the erosion of traditional values (Murray 1984). Public debates and extensive media coverage centred on the crisis of violence and lawlessness which threatened social order.

For Right Realists, deviance is a problem of individuals who *choose* destructive, lawless behaviour and lack self-control and morality. Right Realism was dismissive of 'theoretical' approaches, especially those linking crime to poverty and class inequality. Conservative governments in the UK and the USA began to intensify law-enforcement activity. Police powers were extended, funding for the criminal justice

system was expanded, new prisons were built, and long prison sentences were increasingly used as the most effective deterrent against crime.

In the USA, 'three strikes laws' were introduced by state governments in the 1990s to tackle 'habitual' offenders, and third-time offenders were given mandatory jail terms to keep the public safe. One major consequence of these policies was the enormous growth of prison populations. In the USA it more than doubled, from around 774,000 in 1990 to more than 1.6 million by 2008 (US Census Bureau 2011). In England and Wales, there were 46,400 people in prison in 1990, a figure that had risen to 85,590 by May 2015 (MoJ 2015). An increasing prison population may be seen as a good thing, as it takes criminals off the streets, but it can also be seen as a policy failure, which represents an acceptance that more people will inevitably turn to crime.

Environmental criminologies

More recent control theories see rises in crime as one outcome of the increasing number of opportunities and targets. As societies become more affluent and consumerism becomes central to people's lives, products such as phones, televisions, computers, cars and designer clothing are widely owned. Also, a large number of homes are empty during the daytime, as there are more dual-earner families, so that 'motivated offenders' have a wider range of 'suitable targets'.

Since the 1980s, a significant movement in crime prevention has been towards pragmatic solutions with the aim of 'designing out crime' rather than reforming criminals. The emergence of predictive policing software, such as that offered by PredPol in the opening section of this chapter, is one example of this approach to crime prevention. Collectively, such measures are known as environmental criminology (alternatively called 'administrative criminology'). And though this may seem novel, in fact the approach extends the 'ecological' ideas of the Chicago School of sociology of the 1920s and 1930s. Chicago School sociologists saw certain zones within cities, especially those suffering from economic deprivation and a high level of residential turnover, as productive of 'social disorganization' – the weakening of primary social

relations through poverty and transient populations – and crime flourished in such environments.

The Chicago School's ideas are discussed in detail in chapter 13, 'Cities and Urban Life'.

In the UK, crime prevention policy includes a focus on limiting the opportunities for the commission of crimes, in an approach known as situational crime prevention (SCP), a type of environmental criminology rooted in rational choice theory (Hughes 1998; Colquhoun 2004). This suggests that crime rates are the result of the choices of many individuals, based on their weighing the costs and benefits of a range of possible actions. In short, criminal acts are the product of rational decisions by individuals. SCP and other environmental criminologies acknowledge that rehabilitation programmes have been tried over many years with limited success and that novel approaches are required. Central to SCP are the ideas of *surveillance* and *target hardening*. Surveillance involves communities effectively 'policing' themselves via Neighbourhood Watch schemes and enhanced closed circuit television (CCTV) systems in city centres and public spaces to deter criminals. Modifying the local environment has become a widespread technique, intervening directly into potential 'crime situations'.

Neighbourhood Watch schemes are part of heightened surveillance measures for crime prevention in modern societies.

Target hardening involves strengthening the security of potential targets, making them more resistant. Simple examples are factory-fitted vehicle immobilizers, alarms and improved locks, while gaming

machines are fitted with tougher coin boxes to deter opportunists. Target-hardening techniques combined with [zero-tolerance policing](#) have gained favour over recent decades and have been successful in reducing crime in some contexts. Zero tolerance in the USA targets petty crime and forms of disruptive conduct, such as vandalism, loitering and public drunkenness, in order to prevent more serious forms developing. Although the language of zero tolerance is common in the UK, especially among politicians, in practice British policing has not been significantly changed (Jones and Newburn 2007).

Target hardening and zero-tolerance policing do not address the underlying causes of crime, but they do seek to protect and defend certain social groups. The growing popularity of private security services, car alarms, house alarms, CCTV, guard dogs and gated communities has led some to feel that we are heading towards an 'armoured society' or 'military urbanism', where segments of the population feel compelled to defend themselves against others (Graham 2010). This tendency is occurring not only in Britain and the United States, as the gap between the wealthiest and most deprived widens, but is particularly marked in the former Soviet Union, South Africa and Brazil, where a 'fortress mentality' has emerged among privileged groups.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

22.1 From broken windows to Black Lives Matter?

Target hardening and zero-tolerance policing are rooted in a theory known as 'broken windows' (Wilson and Kelling 1982). A 1960s study by Zimbardo (1969) left abandoned cars without licence plates and with their bonnets raised in the wealthy community of Palo Alto, California, and in a poor neighbourhood in the Bronx, New York. In both locations, as soon as passers-by, regardless of class or race, sensed that the vehicles were abandoned and that 'no one cared', the cars were vandalized. Zimbardo argued that small signs of social disorder, even the appearance of a broken window, will encourage more serious crime to flourish. As a result, minor acts of deviance can lead to a spiral of increasing crime and social decay (Felson 1994).

The broken windows theory has had an impact on policing strategy in many countries, focusing on 'minor' crimes such as traffic violations and drinking or using drugs in public. In the UK, antisocial behaviour orders and contracts were introduced to deal with a range of low-level disorder, while, in the USA, new control measures such as Stay Out of Drug Areas and Off-limits Orders have been used to remove individuals from public parks or shopping centres for littering, drinking alcohol in public and other unwanted activities. This spatial exclusion has been described as the reintroduction of the very old punishment of banishment or 'exile' (Beckett and Herbert 2010).

One flaw with the broken windows theory is that defining 'social disorder' and what behaviour is likely to lead to it is left largely to the police. But without a systematic, shared definition, a wide variety of behaviour could be interpreted as threat to social order. In fact, as crime rates fell throughout the 1990s, the number of complaints of police abuse and violence against citizens rose, particularly from young, black men in urban areas who fitted the

profile of 'potential' criminal. Camp and Heatherton (2016) argue that the iniquitous consequences of policing based on the broken windows thesis was a significant factor in the emergence of the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA, which now campaigns internationally against discrimination and violence by the police towards black communities.

THINKING CRITICALLY

List some of the social groups, especially in city centres, that are more likely to feel the impact of the broken windows focus on minor offences. How might applications of the thesis be modified to avoid the charge that it criminalizes some minority ethnic groups and vulnerable people?

There is another unintended consequence of such policies: as popular crime targets are 'hardened', patterns of crime shift from one domain to another. Strengthening the security of new cars left older models relatively more vulnerable, and car theft shifted to older vehicles. Target-hardening and zero-tolerance approaches run the risk of displacing criminal offences from better protected areas into more vulnerable ones, and, as Left Realists point out, victimization is likely to fall disproportionately on poorer communities. Neighbourhoods that are poor or lacking in social cohesion may well experience a growth in crime and delinquency as affluent areas succeed in defending themselves.

Theoretical conclusions

What can we conclude from this brief survey of theories of crime? First, we must recall a point made earlier: even though crime is only one type of deviant behaviour, it covers such a variety of activities – from shoplifting a bar of chocolate to intentional, planned murder – that it is highly unlikely any single theory could ever account for all criminal conduct. Sociological theories of crime emphasize the continuity between criminal and 'normal' behaviour. The contexts in which particular types of activity are seen as criminal and punishable by law

vary widely and are linked to questions of power and inequality in processes of criminalization, which draw some social groups disproportionately into the criminal justice system.

Nonetheless, the growth of the discipline of criminology since the late 1960s lends support to more pragmatic and policy-oriented perspectives, which seek not just to understand crime or explain why it occurs but to intervene and prevent it. This more applied focus has become the dominant one and, to a large extent, has now overshadowed the earlier sociology of deviance. Criminology today is a distinctive enterprise which makes use of sociological ideas but is not simply another specialism. Its research studies are often funded by government agencies, and criminology is a key element of the 'discourse' of crime within society.

We now turn to recent crime trends and discuss the thorny issue of crime statistics, which form the basis for political debates about the extent of crime and whether it really is increasing or declining. As we will see, finding answers to such apparently simple questions is far from easy.

Patterns of crime

In very blunt terms, rates of crime (according to the number of crimes reported to the police) in the developed countries rose rapidly over much of the twentieth century before the trend went into reverse in the 1990s, since when crime rates have generally fallen. While politicians and media commentators often discuss rising or falling crime rates in this way, sociologists approach crime statistics with great care. There is no international standard for the recording of crime, and national legal systems differ widely, which greatly reduces the scope for a direct comparison of crime rates. Indeed, crime statistics have proved to be the least reliable and most contentious type of information in social research, and some sociologists have suggested they are entirely useless and should be abandoned altogether (Box 1983). This section focuses on the UK, mainly England and Wales, in order to examine some of the general issues and problems associated with crime statistics through a single case.

Before the 1920s there were fewer than 100,000 offences recorded each year in England and Wales. This figure rose to around 500,000 by 1950 and peaked at 5.6 million in 1992 (ONS 2014a). Levels of recorded crime more than doubled between 1977 and 1992. However, since the mid-1990s, the overall number of crimes committed in England and Wales as measured in the recorded police data and additional victim surveys, such as the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW), showed a considerable fall (though the 2017–18 statistics saw no change from the previous year) (see figure 22.1 for the CSEW). This is consistent with the trend in other European countries. The fall in crime statistics took many experts by surprise and its causes are still not clear. But can we take such a statistical shift at face value?
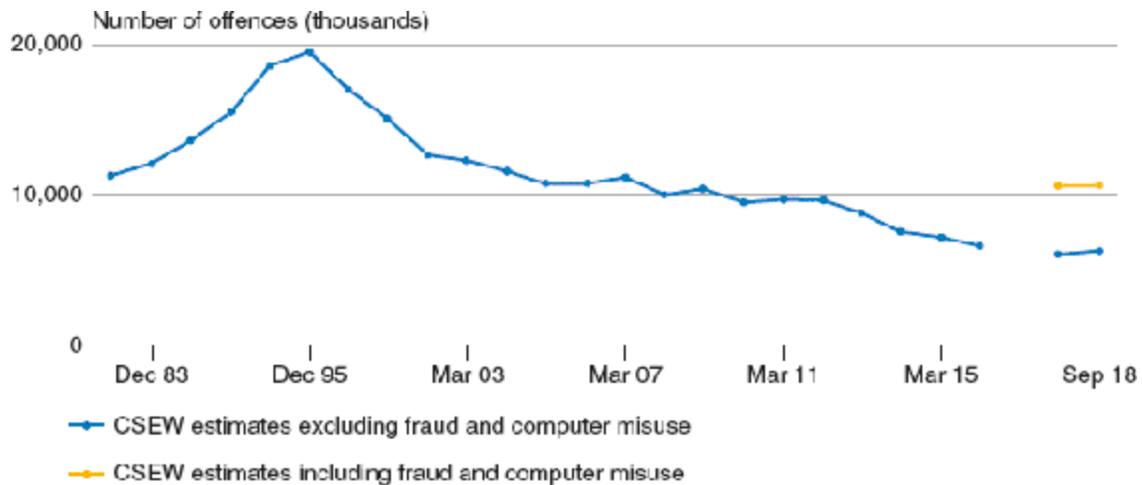
Figure 22.1 CSEW crime estimates, year ending December 1981 to year ending September 2018

> *Note*: New victimization questions on fraud and computer misuse were incorporated into the CSEW from October 2015.
>
> *Source*: ONS (2019a: 6).

Despite generally falling crime figures, there remains a widespread public perception that crime has become *more* prevalent (Nicholas et al. 2007). And while concerns about some types of police-recorded crime have lessened, anxiety over antisocial behaviour – such as littering, groups of teenagers hanging around and drug dealing – has remained quite stable (ONS 2014d: 112–13). In the post-war years of the 1950s, crime was seen as marginal to people's everyday lives, but today it is a prominent public concern. Numerous surveys have shown that people experience heightened anxiety about going out after dark, having their homes burgled or becoming victims of violence.

So how much crime actually exists and how vulnerable are people to becoming victims? What can be done to prevent crime? These questions are highly political, as media coverage has risen along with public outrage and governments have promised to be 'tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime'. Untangling the size of the crime problem and its distribution, let alone designing policies to address it, has proved to be far from straightforward, and we begin our exploration by looking at how crime is reported and recorded.

Understanding crime statistics

How can we determine the extent of crime? One obvious answer is to examine the official statistics on the number of crimes committed, which are recorded by the police. Since these recorded crime statistics are published regularly, it may appear that there is a readily available and reliable source of information on the true extent of crime. Yet this assumption is quite erroneous, as there are significant limitations to all such official statistics.

The most basic limitation of statistics based on reported crime is that the majority of crimes are *not* reported to the police at all. For example, in 2009–10, just 43 per cent of crimes reported by victims to the British Crime Survey (BCS) were known to the police, which means that 57 per cent had not come to their attention. There are many reasons why people do not report crimes (see [table 22.2](#)). Victims may see the offence as a private matter which they have to deal with themselves, they might think their account will not be believed, or they may fear reprisals. Even when a victim is wounded, more than half of these cases are not reported to the police.

Crime may go unreported for other reasons. Some forms of criminal violence, for example, are more 'hidden' than others. Physical and sexual abuse often takes place in the home, care institutions or prisons. Victims may fear they will not be believed by the police or that the abuse will get worse if they report it. For example, victims of domestic violence, overwhelmingly women, are often reluctant to report to the police as they believe the abuser will take revenge or the police will not take it seriously. In the UK, many victims of sexual abuse perpetrated by the former DJ Sir Jimmy Savile did not come forward until after his death, as many thought the police and public would never believe that such a well-respected figure could also be a serial sex offender (Gray and Watt 2013: 5). For other types of offence, people may assume that the crime is too trivial to be reported or that the police would not be able to do anything about it anyway. On the other hand, almost all car thefts are reported, because owners need to have done so in order to claim on their insurance policies.

Table 22.2 Reasons for not reporting crime, year ending March 2017

England and Wales	*Adults aged 16 and over*
	All CSEW crime[1]
	Percentages[2]
Too trivial/not worth reporting	32
Police could not do anything	31
Private/dealt with themselves	18
Police not interested/bothered	18
Inconvenient to report	8
Reported to other authorities	5
Common occurrence	5
No loss/damage	4
Attempt at offence unsuccessful	2
Fear of reprisal	2
Own/family member/friend's fault	2
Dislike or fear of the police/previous bad experience with the police or courts	2
Happened as part of job	1
Offender not responsible for actions	1
Thought had already been reported	1
Tried to report, but unable to contact the police	0
Other reasons	7
Unweighted base – number of adults[3]	3,217

England and Wales	Adults aged 16 and over
	All CSEW crime[1]
	Percentages[2]

1. Excluding fraud and computer misuse.
2. Percentages sum to more than 100 as more than one reason could be given.
3. Unweighted base relates to the number of respondents who said that they did not report an incident to the police.

Second, of crimes that *are* reported to the police, many are not recorded. It has been estimated that, while 43 per cent of crimes in the UK are *reported* to the police, just 29 per cent are *recorded*, though this figure does vary depending on the type of crime (Simmons and Dodds 2003). The police may be sceptical of the validity of the information supplied or the victim may decide not to lodge a formal complaint. The overall effect of such partial reporting and recording is that the official crime statistics reflect only a proportion of all criminal offences committed. Those offences not captured in official statistics are collectively referred to as the *dark figure* of unrecorded crime and are often described as the much larger portion of the 'crime iceberg' that is effectively hidden from view.

A more accurate picture of crime comes from the annual Crime Survey for England and Wales (before April 2012, known as the British Crime Survey (BCS)), which measures levels of crime by asking people directly about their experience. As a result, the CSEW includes crimes that are not reported to or recorded by the police and is an important source of information. Since 2013 the survey has interviewed annually around 35,000 households aged sixteen and over who live in private households, asking about their experience of crime in the previous twelve months. Although there are differences in the rates of growth and decline for different offences, the overall trend since the mid-1990s in both the BCS/CSEW and the recorded crime figures has been downwards.

Surveys such as the CSEW are known as victimization studies and, though they are valuable indicators and do allow comparisons over time, data from these must also be treated with caution. There are strengths and limitations to all crime statistics (see table 22.3). In certain instances, the methodology of the study may result in significant under-reporting. The CSEW is conducted by means of interviews in respondents' homes, and this context might result, for example, in a victim of domestic violence not reporting incidents in the presence of the abuser or where the abuse has taken place.

The survey also excludes those under the age of sixteen. Since January 2009, the annual CSEW *has* interviewed around 4,000 children aged between ten and fifteen (3,000 from 2013), but these data are considered 'experimental'. The survey also omits those who are homeless or live in institutions such as residential care or care homes with nursing. This is particularly important, as these groups can be particularly prone to becoming victims of crime. Just as significantly, the CSEW does not cover businesses or workplaces, which leaves out corporate offending, white-collar crimes such as fraud, and most cybercrimes, including credit card fraud. This means that our information on the extent and significance of these types of crime relies on the police-recorded crime statistics.

Another important source of information about crime is self-report studies, in which people are asked to admit anonymously if they have *committed* any offences. The Offending, Crime and Justice Survey was introduced for England and Wales in 2003 and interviewed 12,000 people aged between ten and sixty-five. Subsequent surveys in 2004, 2005 and 2006 targeted young people between the ages of ten and twenty-five in order to uncover the extent of offending, antisocial behaviour and drug use. Such surveys can be a useful addition to victimization surveys and police records. Of course, they could suffer from under-reporting, as participants might be unwilling to admit an offence for fear of the consequences. Overreporting could also take place, perhaps because of inconsistent memories or through a desire to show off.

What we may legitimately conclude from this brief survey is that crime statistics can be very useful for sociologists. We can learn much about

patterns of crime, how they change over time and which groups tend to be victims. Social scientific research and crime statistics show that crime and victimization are not randomly distributed across the population. Men are more likely than women to be victims and to commit crimes, while young people are more often involved, both as perpetrators and victims, than older people. The likelihood of someone becoming a victim of crime is also closely linked to the area in which they live. Areas suffering from greater material deprivation generally have higher crime rates, and higher proportions of minority ethnic groups tend to live in such areas. People living in inner-city neighbourhoods have a much greater risk of becoming victims of crime than do residents of affluent suburban areas. That minority ethnic groups are concentrated disproportionately in inner-city areas also appears to be a significant factor in higher rates of victimization. Yet what we must also acknowledge is that the official crime figures are the end point of a long production process and that this process also requires sociological investigation.

Table 22.3 Strengths and limitations of the CSEW and police-recorded crime figures

Crime Survey for England and Wales	*Police recorded crime*
Strengths	**Strengths**
Large nationally representative sample survey that provides a good measure of long-term crime trends for the offences and the population it covers (that is, those resident in households)	Has wider offence coverage and population coverage than the CSEW
Consistent methodology over time	Good measure of offences that are well-reported to and well-recorded by the police
Covers crimes not reported to the police and is not affected by changes in police recording practice; therefore, is a reliable measure of long-term trends	Primary source of local crime statistics and for lovervolume crimes (for example, homicide)
Coverage of survey extended in 2009 to include children aged 10 to 15 years resident in households	Provides whole counts (rather than estimates that are subject to sampling variation)
Independent collection of crime figures	Time lag between occurrence of crime and reporting results tends to be short, providing an indication of emerging trends
Limitations	**Limitations**

Crime Survey for England and Wales	Police recorded crime
Strengths	**Strengths**
Survey is subject to error associated with sampling and respondents recalling past events	Excludes offences that are not reported to, or not recorded by, the police and does not include less serious offences dealt with by magistrates' courts (for example, motoring offences)
Potential time lag between occurrence of crime and survey data collection means that the survey is not a good measure of emerging trends	Trends can be influenced by changes in recording practices or police activity as well as public reporting of crime
Excludes crimes against businesses and those not resident in households (for example, residents of institutions and visitors)	Not possible to make long-term comparisons due to fundamental changes in recording practice introduced in 1998 and the year ending March 2003
Headline estimates exclude offences that are difficult to estimate robustly (such as sexual offences) or that have no victim who can be interviewed (for example, homicides and drug offences)	There are concerns about the quality of recording – crimes may not be recorded consistently across police forces and so the true level of recorded crime may be understand
Previously excluded fraud and cybercrime	

An extended discussion of racial discrimination and minority ethnic groups in the criminal justice system can be found in [chapter 8](#), 'Race, Ethnicity and Migration'.

Gender, sexuality and hate crime

It has been plausibly argued that, before the 1970s, criminology generally ignored around half of the population. Feminists criticized the subject (and social science as a whole) as a male-dominated enterprise in which women were largely 'invisible', both in theoretical considerations and in empirical studies. Since the 1970s, many important feminist studies have drawn attention to the way in which criminal acts by women occur in different contexts from those of men. Women's experience of the criminal justice system has also been found to be influenced by gendered assumptions regarding 'appropriate' male and female roles, and feminists have played a critical role in highlighting the prevalence of violence against women, both in the home and in public settings.

Male and female crime rates

Statistical evidence consistently shows the most striking and well-established pattern of global crime: criminal offences are committed overwhelmingly by males. For instance, the prison population in England and Wales has risen fairly consistently since the 1940s, standing at 83,430 in 2018. Yet just 5 per cent of those prisoners were female (Sturge 2018).

There are also differences in the typical crimes for which men and women receive a custodial sentence. As [figure 22.2](#) illustrates, for male prisoners the most common offences are violence against the person and sexual and drug offences, while women are more commonly sentenced and imprisoned for violence against the person, theft and

drug offences (MoJ 2018: 68). The predominance of women in the statistics for theft and handling of stolen goods is a long-established aspect of the gendered pattern of crime, and in 2018 shoplifting accounted for 38 per cent of all indictable prosecutions for women (ibid.: 7). There are also certain crimes that are perceived as specifically 'female crimes', most notably prostitution, for which women have traditionally been convicted while their male clients have not.

Of course, the real gender difference in crime rates *could* be much less than the official statistics show. In the mid-twentieth century, Pollak (1950) suggested as much. He saw women's primary domestic role as providing them with the opportunity to commit 'secret' crimes, such as poisoning, in the home. Pollak regarded women as 'naturally' deceitful and highly skilled at covering up their crimes, which they had learned from having to hide the pain and discomfort of menstruation. But he also argued that female offenders are treated more leniently by the police and courts, as the men within the criminal justice system adopted a 'chivalrous' attitude towards them. Pollak's stereotypical portrayal has no basis in evidence from research studies and seems frankly laughable today. However, the suggestion that women may be treated more leniently in the criminal justice system has been taken more seriously.

There is some evidence that female lawbreakers are brought to court less often, as the police and authorities may interpret their actions in a particular way. The 'gender contract' can be invoked – a stereotypical assumption that to be a woman is to be erratic and impulsive, on the one hand, and in need of protection, on the other (Worrall 1990). On this view, the police and courts *do* act 'chivalrously' and do not punish women for behaviour which would be considered unacceptable for men. It is possible that the police regard female offenders as less dangerous than men and ignore some activities for which males would be arrested. Studies of sentencing suggest that women are also less likely to be imprisoned than men. However, one possible reason for differential sentencing may simply be that women do commit less serious offences than men. If so, then a gender dimension clearly exists, but it is unrelated to the 'chivalry' of officials.
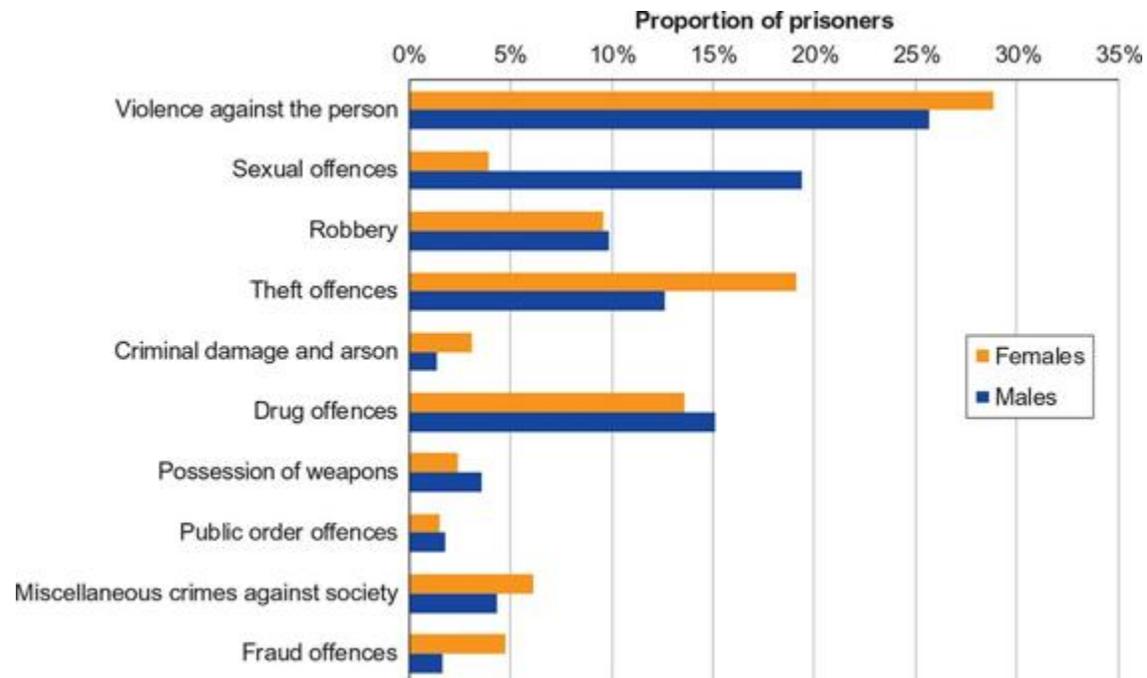
Figure 22.2 Proportion of sentenced prisoners for indictable offences in England and Wales, by offence group and sex, 30 June 2018

Source: MoJ (2018: 68).

Another major difficulty is assessing the relative influence of gender compared to other factors, such as age, class and race. Older women offenders tend to be treated less strictly than their male counterparts, while some studies have shown that black women receive worse treatment from the police than do white women (Player 1989; Britton 2011: 66–8). Evidence of this kind illustrates the complexity of untangling the independent effects of what are, in reality, intersecting social inequalities.

Feminist criminologists have examined how widespread ideas of appropriate 'femininity' can shape women's experience in the criminal justice system. Heidensohn (1996) argued that women are treated more harshly in cases where they have allegedly deviated from feminine norms, which Carlen (1983) sees as breaking the terms of the 'gender contract'. For example, young girls perceived to be sexually promiscuous are more often taken into custody than similarly promiscuous boys. Adult women may be perceived as 'bad mothers' by becoming involved in crime and seen as 'doubly deviant': not only have

they broken the law, but they have also flouted 'appropriate' norms of female behaviour.

Feminists point to the double standard within the criminal justice system: male aggression and violence are seen as natural or 'normal', while an explanation of female offending is often sought in 'psychological' imbalances. In an effort to make female crime more visible, there have been a number of detailed investigations of female criminals, from girl gangs to female terrorists and women in prison. These have shown that violence is not exclusively a characteristic of male criminality. Women *are* much less likely than men to participate in violent crime, but, as figure 22.2 shows, they *do* commit similar acts of violence. Yet the question remains, why are crime rates so different for men and women?

Gendered norms of appropriate behaviour still play a part within the criminal justice system and may lead to harsher treatment for women who break these norms.

Differential treatment could not account for the very large difference between male and female crime rates over long periods of time. In the 1950s and 1960s, gender differences in crime were explained by innate biological or psychological differences, such as strength, passivity or a preoccupation with reproduction. Today, 'feminine' qualities are seen as socially created, in common with traits of traditional 'masculinity'. Through the influence of ideology and ideas of 'gender-appropriate' behaviour, girls and women are constrained and controlled in ways that male activities are not. Since the late nineteenth century some criminologists have predicted that gender equalization would reduce or eliminate differences in crime rates between men and women, but, so far at least, this has not happened and crime remains a robustly gendered phenomenon. 'Male crimes' remain 'male' because of differential gendered socialization and because men's activities and involvements are generally non-domestic compared with women.

Crimes against women

There are certain categories of crime where men are overwhelmingly perpetrators and women are victims. Domestic violence, sexual harassment, stalking, sexual assault and rape are crimes in which males use their social status and physical strength against women, though the CSEW found that a smaller percentage of men also experience non-sexual domestic abuse. In 2017–18, almost 29 per cent of women reported being victims of domestic abuse at some point since the age of sixteen compared to just over 13 per cent of men, and women were more likely than men to be victims of domestic abuse across all age groups (MoJ 2018: 17–19). In 2014 the CSEW estimated that almost 5 million women and 2.7 million men had experienced domestic abuse since the age of sixteen (ONS 2014c: 5). Feminist sociologists also point out that the persistent threat of physical and intimate violence by men affects all women, whether or not they have direct experience of it. Brownmiller (1975) argued that there is a sense in which all women are victims of rape. Women who have never been raped often experience similar anxieties to those who have. They may be afraid to go out alone at night, even on crowded streets, and may be equally fearful of being on their own at home, hence rape is one aspect of a

system of male intimidation that makes all women more cautious than men in daily life.

Far more women than men report having experienced sexual assault. In England and Wales the proportion of women who were victims of sexual assault in 2017 was five times higher than the number of men, a finding that is consistent with earlier surveys (MoJ 2018: 16). For many years, sexual offences of this kind were largely ignored by the criminal justice system, and victims had to persevere to gain legal redress against offenders. In a 1736 ruling, Sir Matthew Hale declared that a husband 'cannot be guilty of rape committed by himself upon his lawful wife, for by their mutual matrimonial consent and contract the wife hath given up herself in this kind unto her husband which she cannot retract' (quoted in Hall et al. 1984: 20). This formulation remained the law in England and Wales until 1994, when an amendment brought 'marital rape' (and 'male rape') within the legislative framework. Even today, the prosecution of crimes of intimate violence against women remains far from straightforward, though feminist criminology has done much to raise awareness and integrate such offences into mainstream debates on crime. In this section we shall focus on the crime of rape in the UK context, leaving domestic violence and sexual harassment to other chapters.

See chapter 15, 'Families and Intimate Relationships', for a wider discussion of domestic violence.

The extent of rape is very difficult to assess accurately as only a small number of rapes are actually reported to and recorded by the police. Although police figures show a general reduction in crime since the mid-1990s, sexual offences are an exception. In 2017–18 police forces in England and Wales recorded 158,162 sexual offences, including 56,698 cases of rape, increases of 14 per cent and 16 per cent respectively from the previous year (ONS 2019a: 32). The police

inspectorate noted that the number of recorded rape cases had been steadily increasing since 2008 (HMIC 2014). However, any suggestion that police-recorded crime figures represent real increases in sexual offending must be treated with caution. In the twenty-first century there have been several changes in police recording practices, and across society there exists a growing willingness to report sexual offences. Following the introduction of the Sexual Offences Act (2003) in May 2004, there have been changes in police recording practice for all sexual offences which led to their redefinition, thus making long-term trends harder to establish (Flatley et al. 2010). Also, 'Operation Yewtree', which was instigated in late 2012 – a police investigation into the extent of Jimmy Savile's sexual offending and associated historic sexual offences – has encouraged more victims of sexual offences to come forward.

In all likelihood, and despite improvements in recording practices, the police-recorded figures still underestimate the prevalence of rape. The ONS (2018e) reports that, in 2016–17, CSEW data provided an estimate of just over 161,000 victims of rape (those aged sixteen to fifty-nine) or assault by penetration (including attempted rape), of whom 80 per cent were women, yet police-recorded figures for the same year show 41,186 offences of rape, with the majority (88 per cent) being offences against women. There are several reasons why a woman might choose not to report sexual violence to the police. The majority of women who are raped either wish to put the incident out of their minds or are unwilling to participate in the process of medical examination, police interrogation and courtroom cross-examination. The legal process often takes a long time and can still be intimidating. Courtroom procedure is public and the victim must come face to face with the accused. Proof of penetration, the identity of the rapist and the fact that the act occurred without the woman's consent all have to be established, and a woman may feel that *she* is the one on trial, particularly if her own sexual history is examined publicly, as often happens in such cases (Soothill and Walby 1991; Abbott et al. 2005: 291–5).

Women's groups have pressed for change in both legal and public thinking about rape. They stress that rape should be seen not as a

sexual offence but as a type of violent crime. It is not just a physical attack but an assault on an individual's integrity and dignity. Rape is clearly related to the association of masculinity with power, dominance and toughness. It is for the most part not the result of overwhelming sexual desire but of the ties between sexuality and feelings of power and superiority. Campaigns have had some real results in changing legislation, and rape is today generally recognized in law to be a specific type of criminal violence. Yet these changes have not had a major impact so far. In 2017, 31 per cent of victims of rape or assault by penetration reported that they had not reported the offence to anyone, and just 17 per cent had told the police. Of those who had told someone, but not the police, almost half said it would be embarrassing to go to the police, over one-third said it would be humiliating, and 40 per cent did not think the police could help (ONS 2018e: 25–6). What this section shows clearly is that, despite efforts to make reporting less onerous and stressful, the traditional stigma attached to sexual offences continues to exert a strong influence today.

Sexual orientation hate crimes

Feminists have pointed out that understandings of violence are highly gendered and influenced by 'common-sense' perceptions about risk and responsibility. Because women are seen as less able to defend themselves, 'common sense' holds that they should alter their behaviour to reduce the risk of becoming a victim of violence. For example, not only should women avoid walking in 'unsafe' neighbourhoods alone and at night, but they should be careful not to dress provocatively or behave in a manner that could be misinterpreted by men. Women who fail to do so can be accused of 'asking for trouble'. In a court setting, their behaviour can be taken as a mitigating factor in considering the perpetrator's violent acts (Dobash and Dobash 1992; Richardson and May 1999).

It has been suggested that a similar 'blame-the-victim' logic applies in the case of violence against LGBT people. Richardson and May (1999) argue that, because they remain stigmatized and marginalized, there is a greater tendency for lesbians and gay men to be seen as 'deserving' of crime rather than as innocent victims. Those who deviate from the

private–public contract by displaying their identities in public are often blamed for making themselves vulnerable to crime.

Table 22.4 Hate crime recorded by the police, England and Wales, 2011/12–2017/18

Source: Home Office (2018: 12).

Hate crime strand	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	% change 2016/17 to 2017/18
Race	35,944	35,845	37,575	42,862	49,419	62,685	71,251	14
Religion	1,618	1,572	2,264	3,293	4,400	5,949	8,336	40
Sexual orientation	4,345	4,241	4,588	5,591	7,194	9,157	11,638	27
Disability	1,718	1,911	2,020	2,515	3,629	5,558	7,226	30
Transgender	313	364	550	607	858	1,248	1,651	32
Total number of motivating factors	43,968	43,933	47,006	54,968	65,500	84,597	100,102	18
Total number of offences	N/A	42,255	44,577	52,465	62,518	80,393	94,098	17

In 2017, the UK government conducted a national survey online of LGBT people's experiences which produced 108,000 responses, making it the largest national survey of LGBT people anywhere in the world. This took place against the backdrop of rising levels of hate crime against sexual minorities and transgender people. In 2016–17, 9,157 hate crimes on grounds of sexual orientation were recorded by the police in the UK, a rise of 27 per cent on the previous year. Some 40 per cent of respondents said they had experienced an incident in the past year, of which 26 per cent involved verbal harassment or insults, 14 per cent had their LGBT status disclosed without consent, 6 per cent received threats of physical, sexual violence, 2 per cent had experienced

actual physical violence, and a further 2 per cent experienced sexual violence (Government Equalities Office 2019).

In 2009–10, lesbian, gay or bisexual people were also more likely to have experienced domestic abuse in the last year (13 per cent compared with 5 per cent of heterosexuals), while 17 per cent of lesbian or bisexual women reported domestic abuse compared with just 9 per cent of gay or bisexual men (Roe 2010: 63). One reason for this difference may be the higher proportion of younger gay, lesbian and bisexual couples (37 per cent compared with 21 per cent of heterosexual couples), as intimate violence has been found to be particularly associated with those aged sixteen to twenty-four (Povey et al. 2009).

Crimes against gay men in the UK led to calls for the adoption of 'hate crime' legislation to protect the human rights of those who remain stigmatized in society. The Criminal Justice Act of 2003 allowed judges in England and Wales to increase a sentence if an assault was motivated by 'homophobia' – the hatred or fear of homosexuals. Following lobbying in relation to extreme anti-gay websites and some song lyrics advocating violence against gay men, the 2003 Act was extended in the Equality Act 2010 to outlaw incitement to homophobic hatred. However, the introduction of same-sex marriage in England, Wales and Scotland in 2014 along with positive portrayals of gay relationships in mainstream TV drama are signs of changing social attitudes.

Young people as offenders and victims

One of the more enduring and reliable models of offending that applies to many societies is the age–crime curve. This describes the typical bell-shaped pattern of offending, in which crime begins to increase from late childhood, reaches a peak in mid- to late adolescence, before falling back during adulthood (Loeber 2012: 11). There may be some variations in the shape of the curve; young women may reach the peak before young men, for example, and the curve for violent crime peaks before that for property crime. Nonetheless, the age–crime curve model is remarkably consistent and forms the basis for contemporary studies

that try to unpick *falling* crime rates and variations in age-related patterns of offending (Matthews and Minton 2018).

Popular fears about young people's behaviour in the developed countries have long centred on offences such as theft, burglary and assault, typical 'street crimes' that are perceived to be committed primarily by young working-class males. Similarly, media coverage of crime rates often focuses on the 'moral breakdown' of youth, highlighting issues such as vandalism, school truancy and drug use. Yet the discourse linking young people with criminal activity and deviance is not a recent development.

The idea of 'delinquency' can be found in England in the sixteenth century and recurred through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In the early nineteenth century, one report noted an 'alarming increase' in juvenile delinquency in London, identifying the main causes as poor parenting, lack of education and suitable employment, and 'violation of the Sabbath' (Muncie 2009). Excluding the final 'cause', these seem remarkably contemporary, illustrating society's persistent concern with young people's moral and social development. Industrialization led to urban squalor for many poor families and an increase in petty theft and property crime. The mid-nineteenth century also saw the emergence of 'child saving' movements, comprised mainly of middle-class philanthropists seeking to tackle truancy and delinquency by regulating the behaviour of young people. Criminologists argue that the nineteenth-century concern with juvenile crime was not a simple response to rising crime levels but the product of shifting attitudes towards young people, who now had to be managed by agencies outside the family (Banks 2013: 3).

As we saw earlier, by the mid-twentieth century, young people were again the focus of a series of moral panics around consumerism and spectacular subcultures involving popular music, dress styles and fashion, attitudes towards sex and sexuality, and, increasingly, recreational drug use (Muncie 2015). One of the more recent concerns relates to young people's use of digital devices and their presence in online social media, which has been presented as unhealthy, antisocial and potentially dangerous. The recurring theme of young people as a

social problem shows that the state of youth is seen as an indicator of the health of society itself.

Official statistics do show relatively high rates of offending among young people, with more boys than girls admitting to having committed an offence. In the Offending, Crime and Justice Survey (OCJS) carried out in England and Wales between 2003 and 2006, 5,000 young people between ten and twenty-six years of age formed a panel study and were interviewed four times over the period. Some 49 per cent of the sample reported committing one or more offences over the four years, 27 per cent had used drugs, and 72 per cent admitted some form of harmful or antisocial behaviour (Hales et al. 2009). The peak age for offending was in the late teens, for both males and females, while that for violent offences was fourteen to fifteen ([figure 22.3](#)).

According to these data, it may appear that offending by young people is a major social problem. Yet we must be cautious in making this assumption. The OCJS analysis identified a small number of 'prolific offenders' who accounted for a disproportionate number of the offences reported, while more than half of the sample did not admit to committing any offences over the four-year period. Muncie (2009) has noted that an isolated event involving young people and crime – such as the murder of two-year-old James Bulger in 1993 by two ten-year-old boys – can deflect attention away from larger social issues.

Similar caution can be expressed about the popular view that most youth crime is drug-related. A 2006 UK Department of Health survey of more than 10,000 schoolchildren aged between eleven and fifteen revealed that 9 per cent were regular smokers, 25 per cent had drunk alcohol in the past week, 21 per cent had taken drugs in the past year, and 4 per cent had used 'Class A' drugs such as cocaine or heroin (DoH 2006). However, trends in drug use have shifted away from 'hard' drugs, such as heroin, towards combinations of substances such as amphetamines, new psychoactive substances, alcohol and Ecstasy. Much of this usage is associated with club subcultures and lifestyles rather than the basis of an expensive, addictive habit pushing young people into lives of crime.
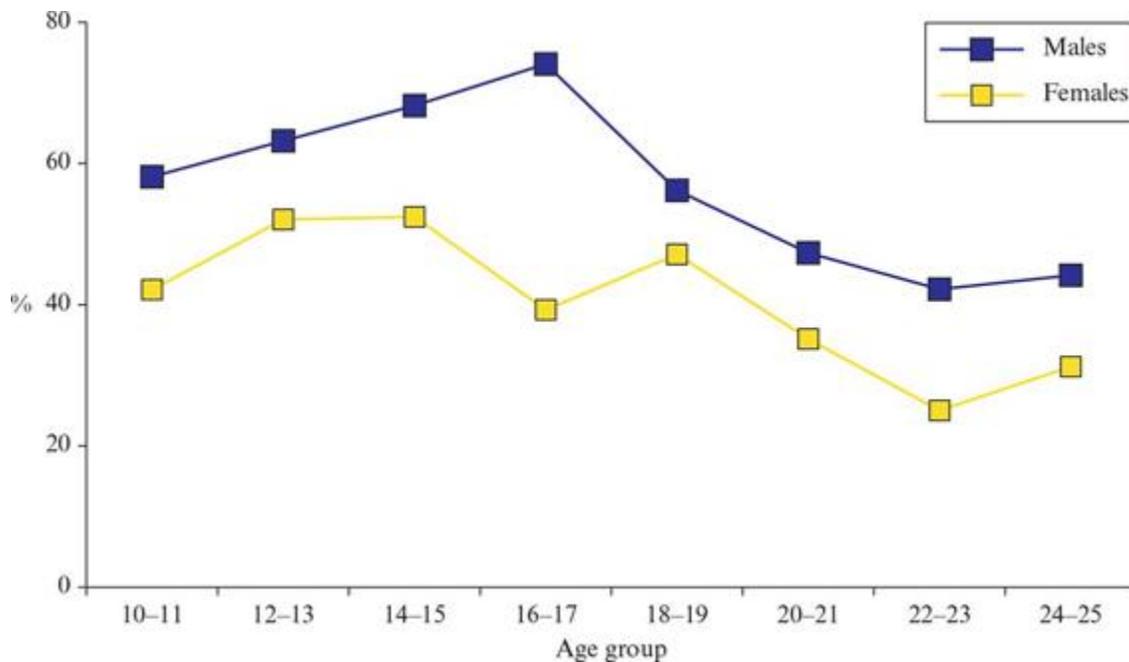
Figure 22.3 Percentage of the panel offending over a four-year period, by age at the start of the period and gender

Source: Hales et al. (2009: 9).

The other side of the association between youth and crime is that young people are more likely to be *victims* of crime than older age groups (see figure 22.4). The increasing political focus on victims and the development of 'victimology' as a specialist field of inquiry have helped to produce a more balanced understanding of young people's involvement in crime and deviance. In 2017–18, young people aged sixteen to twenty-four were more likely to be victims of violence than older groups.

Despite making up just 13 per cent of the population, young people accounted for 26 per cent of all victims of violent offences recorded by the police in England and Wales.

In recent years the abuse of children and young people by adults has become a major issue in the UK. Previously children's voices were largely ignored and their allegations about the abusive behaviour of adults were not believed. For example, a series of inquiries revealed the widespread abuse of children in care homes and other institutional settings in the 1970s and 1980s. One of the most serious involved abuse against children in numerous care homes in the counties of

Clwyd and Gwynedd, North Wales. By mid-2014, 283 people had come forward with allegations of abuse, eleven people had been charged with offences, and another fifty-six had been identified by police as potential suspects (Wales Online 2014).
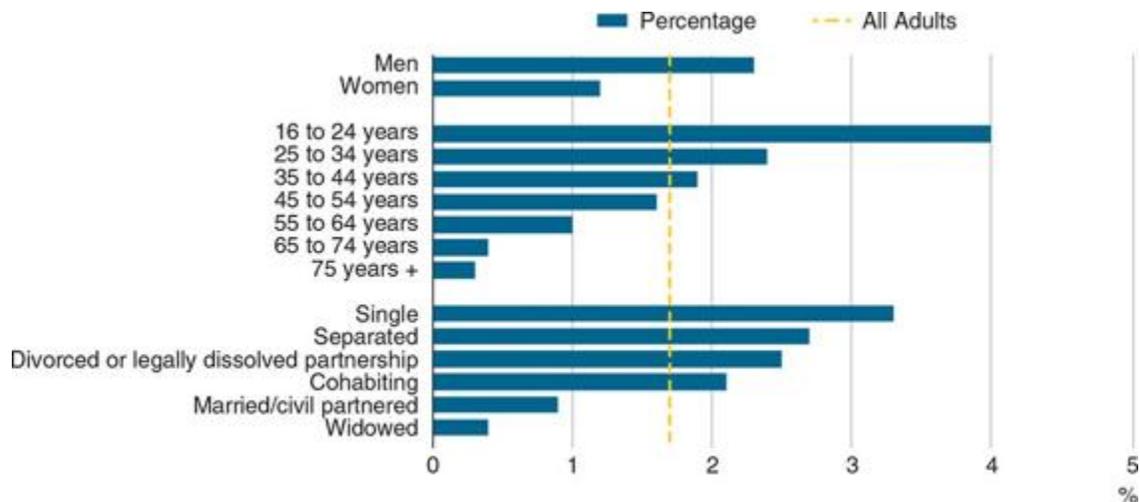
Figure 22.4 Characteristics associated with a higher likelihood of being a victim of violence, England and Wales, year ending March 2018

Source: ONS (2019m: 24).

The organized sexual abuse of children and young people by adults cannot be consigned to historic cases. In 2018, twenty men were found guilty of involvement in a grooming gang in Huddersfield that were convicted of 120 offences against fifteen girls in a 'campaign of rape and abuse' between 2004 and 2011 (BBC News 2018a). Similar sex trafficking gangs were found to be operating in Derby, Oxford, Bristol and elsewhere.

In Rotherham, at least 1,400 children aged between ten and sixteen, overwhelmingly girls, were sexually abused by an organized trafficking gang between 1997 and 2013 (Jay 2014). The scale and brutality of the abuse shocked everyone:

> They were raped by multiple perpetrators, trafficked to other towns and cities in the north of England, abducted, beaten, and intimidated. There were examples of children who had been doused in petrol and threatened with being set alight, threatened with guns, made to witness brutally violent rapes and threatened they would be next if they told anyone. Girls as young as 11 were raped by large numbers of male perpetrators. This abuse is not confined to the past but continues to this day. (Ibid.: 1)

The abuse in Rotherham highlighted many failures in the social care system and policing. In particular, despite a majority of victims describing the perpetrators as 'Asian', care workers told the inquiry they were 'nervous' about discussing the perpetrators' ethnicity for fear of being seen as 'racist', while local councillors just hoped 'the problem' would go away.

We can conclude that the common-sense connection between youth and delinquency is clearly inaccurate. As sexual abuse cases show, crimes committed by older adults can be far more serious than those engaged in by young people. Youth criminality is often associated with activities that, strictly speaking, do not break the criminal law. Antisocial behaviour, subcultural activity and non-conformity may be regarded as deviance or delinquency, but none of these is *criminal* conduct and may be considered quite ordinary, borderline-nuisance behaviour that is part of 'growing up'. Only in recent years has the image of young people as 'folk devils' been shown as stereotypical and highly misleading.

'White-collar', corporate and state crime

The term white-collar crime was first introduced by Edwin Sutherland in 1949. It refers to crime that is carried out by those in the more affluent sectors of society, often against the interests of the companies for which they work. Croall (2001: 17) defines it as 'an abuse of a legitimate occupational role which is regulated by law'. White-collar crime therefore covers many types of activity, including tax fraud, illegal sales practices, securities and land frauds, embezzlement, and the

manufacture or sale of dangerous products, as well as straightforward theft.

The world's largest energy trading company, Enron, collapsed in 2001 after the discovery that false accounting was disguising huge debts. Bankruptcy caused the loss of thousands of jobs around the world, and several of the company's senior staff, including the founder, Kenneth Lay, were arrested. A similar scandal at communications giant WorldCom, in 2002, shows that wealthy and powerful people carry out crimes whose consequences can be more far-reaching and damaging than the crimes of the poor. Of course, most white-collar crime is not as grand as that which occurred at Enron or WorldCom.

The distribution of white-collar crime is even harder to measure than other types of crime, and many white-collar offences are not part of official statistics at all. We can distinguish between white-collar crime and crimes of the powerful. The former mainly involves the use of a middle-class or professional position to engage in illegal activities for personal gain. The latter are those in which the authority conferred by a position is used in criminal ways – as when an official accepts a bribe to favour a particular policy.

Although some white-collar crime is tolerated by companies and police forces do not routinely patrol sites where these offences may be committed, the cost of such crime is enormous. Far more research has been carried out on the subject in the United States than in Britain and Europe. The crude economic cost of white-collar crime (including insurance fraud, employee theft and embezzlement) is estimated to be at least US$200 billion a year, far greater than 'street' crimes such as robberies, burglaries, larceny, forgeries and car thefts, which the FBI calculated at between US$10 billion and $13.5 billion (Potter and Miller 2002: 2–3).

Corporate crime

In contrast to white-collar crime for personal gain, corporate crime refers to offences committed by large corporations and includes illegal pollution, mislabelling of products, and violations of health and safety regulations. The increasing power and influence of large corporations

and their global reach mean that our lives are touched by them in many ways. Corporations produce the devices we use and the food we eat and have an enormous impact on the natural environment and financial markets. Corporate crimes show us that crime is not always something committed exclusively by individuals against other individuals but is embedded within the economic system that confers to capitalist corporations the power to avoid prosecution (see 'Using your sociological imagination' 22.2).

The effects of corporate crime are often experienced unevenly. Those who are disadvantaged by other types of socio-economic inequalities tend to suffer disproportionately. For example, safety and health risks in the workplace tend to be concentrated most heavily in low-paying occupations, while many of the risks from healthcare products and pharmaceuticals have a greater impact on women than men. Flouting regulations concerning the preparation of new drugs, ignoring safety in the workplace or environmental pollution may cause physical harm or death to large numbers of people. Deaths from hazards at work far outnumber murders, although precise statistics about accidents at work are difficult to obtain, and we cannot assume that all, or even most, of these are the direct result of employer negligence. Nevertheless, there is some basis to suppose that many are due to the neglect of legally binding safety regulations by employers or managers.

Victimization patterns in corporate crime are not straightforward. Sometimes there are 'obvious' victims, as in the case of the gas poisoning of workers and residents in and around the Bhopal chemical plant in India which exploded in 1984, or the health dangers posed to women by specific makes of silicone breast implants. Where companies have been negligent, such as in rail accidents in the UK, those injured in crashes or relatives of those who were killed have called for the company executives responsible for the track and trains to be brought to trial.

USING YOUR SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

22.2 The criminogenic corporations of capitalism?

Stephen Box (1983) argued that, in capitalist economies, where companies are in competition with one another, corporations are inherently 'criminogenic' – that is, they are forced to consider criminal actions if these lead to a competitive advantage. They also tend to see the harm they cause in simple calculations of financial risk.

Gary Slapper and Steve Tombs (1999) reviewed both quantitative and qualitative studies of corporate crime and concluded that a large number of corporations do not adhere to the legal regulations which apply to them. Like Box, they claim that corporate crime is not confined to a few 'bad apples' but is pervasive and widespread. Other studies have revealed six types of violation linked to large corporations: administrative (paperwork or non-compliance), environmental (pollution, permits violations), financial (tax violations, illegal payments), labour (working conditions, hiring practices), manufacturing (product safety, labelling) and unfair trade practices (anti-competition, false advertising).

THINKING CRITICALLY

List some factors which make the monitoring, detection and prosecution of corporate criminality so difficult for police forces. Suggest ways in which politicians could intervene to improve the monitoring, detection and prosecution of corporate crimes.

Yet in many cases the victims of corporate crime do not see themselves as victims at all. This is because, in 'conventional' crimes, the physical proximity between victim and offender is much closer – it is difficult not to recognize that you have been mugged. But, in the case of corporate crime, greater distances in time and space mean that people

may not realize they have been victimized or may not know how to seek redress. It is also more difficult to know who to blame when harmful decisions are made by groups of boardroom executives rather than by single individuals. For legal systems founded on the principle of individual responsibility, corporate offences pose specific legal problems that have proved difficult to solve.

State crime

One other form of criminality, which has not received as much attention as other types, is <u>state crime</u> – 'crime by and for the benefit of the state' (Doig 2011). This pithy working definition may seem admirably simple and clear, but in fact it hides some difficult definitional problems that have held back work on this subject. What do we mean by 'the state' and are the wrongdoings of the state really 'crimes', or do they fall under the broader category of 'harm'? Is 'the state' simply the government, police, the military and various 'state-funded' public bodies? Should we include companies carrying out government-funded contracts such as arms manufacturers and private military work? Given the different departments of state and the decisions taken on the ground by officials, managers and commanders, working out who are the ultimate decision-makers is not easy.

Similarly, state *crime* could be restricted to the actions of states and state officials that break either the state's own laws or international law. For example, an official inquiry into the involvement of the Netherlands in the 2003 invasion of Iraq concluded that the Dutch government *had* breached international law. In the UK, some suggested that taking the country into an 'illegal war' in Iraq made the then prime minister, Tony Blair, a war criminal who should be tried as such. Domestically, the Saville Inquiry was set up in 1998 to investigate 'Bloody Sunday' – the killing of thirteen people on a civil rights demonstration by British soldiers in Derry, Northern Ireland, in 1972. In 2019 one former soldier was charged with murder and attempted murder while sixteen others faced no charge. Was the decision to shoot made by a senior officer on the day or was it part of a deliberate state policy devised by high-level politicians? In all these cases the focus is on whether domestic or international law has been broken.

Yet, as the state is the gatekeeper of the boundary between crime and legality and can define and redefine what constitutes 'crime', this definition may be too narrow in any national context. Consequently, some criminologists look to extend the definition. Ross (2000: 5–6) defines state crimes as 'coverups, corruption, disinformation, unaccountability, and violations of domestic and/or international laws. It also includes those practices that, although they fall short of being officially declared illegal, are perceived by the majority of the population as illegal or socially harmful (e.g. worker exploitation).' This definition takes in 'acts of omission' (such as nonenforcement of workplace regulations) alongside the active commission of crime and covers publicly defined 'harm' as well as crime.

Others see this kind of definition as too broad to be useful. Sharkansky (2000: 39) argues that the term 'state crime' has been used so indiscriminately by researchers that it has become 'just another epithet for *undesirable activities*'. These definitional disputes have dogged the study of state crime and served to restrict the growth of this sub-field. As Doig (2011: 44) suggests, 'it is true that the study of state crime continues to be a niche activity. Even within that niche, however, there are divergences on a number of issues.'

Crime in global context

International networks of organized groups of criminals have existed for many years, coordinating their activities across national boundaries and legislative territories. However, intensified globalization processes and the rapid development of information technology have created new opportunities that did not exist previously but have also enabled conventional crimes – such as fraud, deception and robbery – to move into online environments. For some, the transnational networks of organized crime are *the* key defining characteristic of crime in the twenty-first-century world (Albanese and Reichel 2013).

Organized crime

Organized crime refers to illegal forms of activity that have many of the characteristics of orthodox business. Albanese (2011) defines it as 'continuing criminal enterprises that rationally work to profit from illicit activities that are often in great public demand. Its continuing existence is maintained through the use of force, threats, monopoly control, and/or the corruption of public officials.' Among other activities, organized crime includes smuggling, human trafficking, the drugs trade, prostitution, large-scale theft and protection rackets. While it has traditionally developed within individual countries in culturally specific ways, it has become increasingly transnational in scope.

The reach of organized crime today is felt in every country, but historically there have been a small number of centres. In the USA for example, organized crime rivals any of the major orthodox sectors of economic business. National and local criminal organizations provide illegal goods and services to mass consumers, and illegal gambling on lotteries and sporting events represents a major source of criminal income. Organized crime has become so significant in American society because of an early association with – and in part a modelling on – the activities of the industrial 'robber barons' of the late nineteenth century. Many of the early industrialists made fortunes by exploiting immigrant labour, largely ignoring legal regulations on working

conditions and often using a mixture of corruption and violence to build their empires.

Organized crime is much more complex and sophisticated today than it was thirty years ago, and there is no single national organization linking different criminal groups. Some of the larger organizations find ways of laundering money through the big clearing banks, in spite of the procedures intended to foil them, using their 'clean' money to invest in legitimate businesses.

The changing face of organized crime

Castells (1998) argues that the activities of organized crime groups and the coordination of criminal activities across borders – with the help of new information technologies – is becoming a central feature of the global economy. Involved in activities ranging from the narcotics trade to counterfeiting, human trafficking and smuggling, organized criminal groups operate in flexible international networks rather than within their own territorial realms.

Although we have little systematic information on organized crime in the UK, it is known that extensive criminal networks exist in most large cities around the world, many with international connections. Some of the main transnational criminal networks are the Italian Mafia, the Triads (Hong Kong), the Yakuza (Japan), the Mexican drug gangs such as the Sinaloa Cartel, and organized crime syndicates in Russia, Eastern Europe and West Africa (Obokata and Payne 2018: 3). Castells argues that criminal groups tend to set up strategic alliances with each another to extend their global reach. The international narcotics trade, weapons trafficking, the sale of nuclear material, and money laundering have all become 'linked' across borders and crime groups. Criminal organizations tend to base their operations in 'low-risk' countries where there are fewer threats to their activities. The former Soviet Union has been one of the main points of convergence for international organized crime. The flexible nature of networked crime makes it relatively easy for groups to evade the reach of law-enforcement initiatives. If one criminal 'safe haven' becomes more risky, the 'organizational geometry' can shift to form a new pattern.

Despite numerous campaigns by governments and police forces, the narcotics trade expanded rapidly in the 1980s and early 1990s. Although it is notoriously difficult to arrive at an accurate figure for the global drugtrafficking market, the best estimates suggest that in 2014 it was between US$426 and US$652 billion (Global Financial Integrity 2017). Heroin networks stretch across the Far East, particularly South Asia, and are also located in North Africa, the Middle East and Latin America. Supply lines pass through Paris and Amsterdam, from where drugs are commonly supplied to Britain. As the example of Mexico ('Global society' 22.1) shows, organized criminal activity has the potential to disrupt community life and social order, promote political corruption and financial fraud, and normalize extreme violence against citizens. Preventing it from taking hold elsewhere could hardly be a more vital task.

Cybercrime

The digital revolution provides exciting opportunities and benefits for all, but it may also heighten people's vulnerability to crime and facilitate the activities of organized crime gangs. There are numerous definitions of cybercrime, but it is best to start with a broad concept such as that of Thomas and Loader (2000: 3): 'Cybercrime can be regarded as computer-mediated activities which are either illegal or considered illicit by certain parties and which can be conducted through global electronic networks.' And while it is difficult to quantify accurately the extent of cybercrime, it is possible to outline some of the major forms it has taken so far.

Athique (2013: 230–1) lists twenty-six possible types of cybercrime, including illegal financial transactions, blackmail and intimidation, trafficking and slavery, false impersonation, unauthorized surveillance, flaming and crimes of netiquette, computer infection, data theft, online hate crimes, online credit card fraud, media piracy, identity theft, dissemination of paedophile materials, cyber-stalking, releasing viral computer programs, cyber-terrorism and the publication of restricted information.

[Global society 22.1](#) Mexico's war on drugs

Mexican drug trafficking organizations are the largest foreign suppliers of heroin, methamphetamine, and cocaine to the United States, according to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA). Mexican suppliers are responsible for most heroin and methamphetamine production, while cocaine is largely produced in Bolivia, Colombia, and Peru and then transported through Mexico. Mexican cartels are also leading manufacturers of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid many times more potent than heroin. U.S. seizures of the drug have soared in recent years....

Mexico's drug cartels are in a constant state of flux. Over the decades, they have grown, splintered, forged alliances, and battled one another for territory....

What led to the cartels' growth?

Experts point to both domestic and international forces. In Mexico, cartels pay off judges, police, politicians, and other officials using their vast drug profits, which the U.S. government estimates to be worth tens of billions of dollars a year. The cartels flourished during the decades that Mexico was ruled by a single party, the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI).... The PRI's unbroken reign finally ended in 2000 with the election of President Vicente Fox of the National Action Party (PAN).

Protestors mark the tenth anniversary of Mexico's declaration of war on drugs by creating a memorial in Mexico City to those who have died. A number of grassroots protest movements have sprung up in Mexico protesting against the 'drug wars'.

With new politicians in power, cartels ramped up violence against the government in an effort to reestablish their hold on the state. At the international level, Mexican cartels began to take on a much larger role in trafficking drugs in the late 1980s, after U.S. government agencies broke up the Caribbean networks used by Colombian cartels to smuggle cocaine. Mexican gangs eventually shifted from being couriers for Colombian DTOs to being wholesalers. The U.S. government, despite waging a 'war on drugs' and conducting other counternarcotics efforts abroad, has made little progress in reducing the demand for illegal drugs….

What measures has Mexico taken to stem the drug trade?

President Calderon (2006–12) declared war on the cartels shortly after taking office. Over the course of his six-year term, he deployed tens of thousands of military personnel to supplement and, in many cases, replace local police forces he viewed as corrupt. With U.S.

assistance, the Mexican military captured or killed twenty-five of the top thirty-seven drug kingpins in Mexico. The militarized crackdown was a centerpiece of Calderon's tenure. However, some critics say Calderon's decapitation strategy created dozens of smaller, more violent drug gangs…. The government registered more than 120,000 homicides over the course of Calderon's term, nearly twice as many as occurred during his predecessor's time in office. (Experts estimate that between one-third and one-half of the homicides in Mexico are linked to cartels.)

Calderon's successor said he would focus more on reducing violence against civilians and businesses than on removing the leaders of cartels. Despite these ambitions, President Pena Nieto (2012–18) relied heavily on the military, in combination with the federal police, to battle the cartels. He also created a new national police force, or gendarmerie, of several thousand officers. Homicides declined in the first years of Pena Nieto's presidency. But 2015 saw an uptick, and by the end of his term the number of homicides had risen to the highest level in modern Mexican history. Experts attribute this to the continued fallout of Calderon's kingpin strategy and territorial feuds between gangs.

President Lopez Obrador (2018–) announced that the government's 'war' on drugs is over, saying he would prioritize reducing homicide rates over apprehending cartel 'capos.' Citing public health and safety concerns, his administration also released a plan to decriminalize drugs and fund treatment for addicts. Despite campaign promises to demilitarize policing, he deployed a new national guard to boost security, a move critics say echoes his predecessors' mistakes.

What has the toll been on human rights?

Civil liberties groups, journalists, and others have criticized the Mexican government's war on the cartels for years, accusing the military and police of widespread human rights violations, including torture, extrajudicial killings, and forced disappearances. The whereabouts of more than thirty-seven thousand people who have gone missing since 2006 remain a mystery. One of the most

chilling examples of these abuses occurred in the southern state of Guerrero in 2014, when more than forty student protestors were abducted and killed. Mexican investigators found that the mayor had directed police to kidnap the students and hand them over to a local drug gang. The incident prompted mass demonstrations across Mexico.

In recent years, the emergence of vigilante groups, known as *autodefensas*, has exacerbated human rights concerns. Made up of mostly rural farmers, these civilian militias have attempted to fight drug traffickers and restore order to towns, filling in where local police have failed. Though illegal, these groups became a formidable force against the cartels in states including Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Michoacan. Some observers are concerned these groups have ties to organized crime and could turn on the people they claim to protect.

Source: Extracted from Lee et al. (2019).

Customs officials spend much of their time tracking and attempting to intercept the movement of drugs across national borders.

Various categories of cybercriminal have also been identified, such as hackers (carrying out intrusions via digital systems), viral coders (who produce and disseminate software that attacks computers), digital pirates (who illegally copy, share or stream copyrighted material), cyber fraudsters (who commit the age-old practices of fraud and confidence tricks in online environments), online voyeurs (who, in some countries, view pornography illegally) and paedophiles (who groom and abuse children and/or disseminate child pornography online), cyber-stalkers (who harass victims via email, chatrooms, social media, and so on), cyber-bullies and hate gangs (who target individuals or groups in hate crimes) and cyber-terrorists (who disseminate propaganda and attack state IT infrastructure) (Athique 2013: 233–40).

Wall (2007) argues that there have been three successive phases of cybercrime, closely tied to the development of communication technology. *First-generation cybercrimes* are those that make use of

computers to assist traditional types of offending. Drug dealers, for instance, employ whatever forms of communication exist and, even in the absence of computers, would continue to buy and sell drugs. Similarly, finding information on how to build weapons or bombs may be easier on the internet, but there have been, and still are, conventional sources available. *Second-generation cybercrimes* are those where the internet has opened up new global opportunities for fairly conventional crimes. Examples are the global trade in pornography, international fraud and theft, and deception via internet auction sites. Second-generation cybercrimes are therefore 'hybrids' – traditional offences within a new global networked environment.

Third-generation or *'true' cybercrimes* are those that are solely the product of the internet and which can take place only within cyberspace. Examples are the illegal sharing of music and film, vandalism of virtual environments, 'phishing', and spam emails containing virus attachments. This last is an example of the automation of cybercrime, where 'botnets' enable control over the infected computer, thus allowing personal information to be gathered for future identity theft. Third-generation cybercrimes have been greatly facilitated by faster and cheaper broadband, which allows people to remain online for much longer periods, opening up new criminal opportunities.

> ### THINKING CRITICALLY
>
> Look back at the list of possible cybercrimes above. Which of these are 'pure' or 'third-generation' cybercrimes in Wall's terms and which are simply old crimes that have moved online?

There are some indications that cybercrime is rising, particularly as new forms of digital media continue to develop, though it is difficult to reach a firm conclusion. A YouGov poll of UK internet users in 2005 found that one person in twenty had lost money in online scams, while a 2001 survey revealed that 52 per cent of companies interviewed said internet fraud posed real problems for them (Wall 2007). Credit and debit card fraud has increased rapidly since the 1990s, peaking at almost £610 million in 2008. However, the introduction of new fraud

screening tools by retailers and heightened online authentication processes led to a large fall, down to £341 million in 2011, before losses began to rise again. UK Finance (2018: 3) reported that there were over 1 million cases of unauthorized fraud in the first six months of 2018 (10 per cent higher than 2017), incurring losses of £358 million. Banks also prevented £705.7 million in attempted fraud over the same period.

As businesses take steps to prevent known bank card fraud, criminals devise new methods. For instance, there has been a large rise in *authorized* 'push-payment' scams, in which account holders are deceived, persuaded or otherwise encouraged to transfer money into another account held by the fraudsters. In the first six months of 2018, 34,128 cases of push-payment fraud were recorded in the UK and £145.4 million was lost (ibid.). Several other card fraud methods are well known. 'Deception fraud' by criminals posing as bank staff or police involves tricking card holders, either by phone or face to face, into giving out their card security details or even handing over the card and PIN number. 'Card-not-present' fraud is when cardholders' details are stolen and used to make 'remote purchases' online or by phone. As online shopping and banking become normal aspects of life, it seems likely that opportunities for this kind of fraud will continue to increase.

The global reach of online crime poses particular challenges for law enforcement. Criminal acts perpetrated in one country have the power to affect victims across the globe, and this has troubling implications for detecting and prosecuting crimes. It becomes necessary for police from the countries involved to determine the jurisdiction in which the act occurred and to agree on extraditing the offenders and providing the necessary evidence. Although police cooperation across national borders may improve with the growth of cybercrime, at present cybercriminals have a great deal of room for manoeuvre.

At a time when financial, commercial and production systems in countries around the world are more tightly integrated electronically, rising levels of internet fraud, unauthorized electronic intrusions and the constant threat of computer viruses serve as potent warnings of the vulnerability of global computer networks and security systems. From the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) to the Japanese government's anti-hacker police force, governments are scrambling to

contend with new and often elusive forms of cross-national criminal activity.

Even though the victims of cybercrimes such as financial fraud, 'sextortion', cyber-bullying and stalking do suffer very real harm, trauma and emotional distress, the advent of cybercrimes should not lead us to expect a dystopian future of ever-increasing criminality and victimization. As Jane and Martellozzo (2017: 3) argue, 'Without wishing to underplay the very real harms caused by crime and victimization online, it is important to remember that the vast bulk of online engagement and interactions are banal, often taking forms such as shopping, banking, making small talk with friends, and reminding significant others to please pick up some tofu on the way home from work.'

Global society 22.2 Cyber security: policing the ransomware gangs

Most people who access the internet at work or from home will be aware that cyber-criminals and gangs also operate in online environments and will have taken steps to avoid becoming their victims. However, it is not just private individuals that are targeted online. Many businesses, charities and government departments (particularly health services) have also faced attacks, particularly from ransomware gangs engaged in 'digital extortion'.

Ransomware is a form of malicious software (malware) which accesses files, programmes or operating systems, blocking users from accessing them again until payment is made for a decryption key to unlock them. Ransomware can be contained in email attachments, on social media or via pop-up windows and spreads across the internet rather like a biological virus, adding victims as it travels. For example, between 2014 and mid-2015, one ransomware variant, called CryptoWall, successfully extorted around US$18 million (usually in the crypto currency Bitcoin) from thousands of individuals and businesses (De Groot 2019).

The first recognizable ransomware attack can be traced to 1989, though this was unsophisticated by contemporary standards, and it was not until around 2005 that ransomware became a serious problem (De Groot 2019). Liska and Gallo (2017: 17) argue that the rapid growth of ransomware crime since 2005 shows that 'success begets success': 'It is the free market at work in the most anarcho-capitalistic way possible. In fact, markets have arisen that allow for the sale of high-end mature ransomware, thus lowering the barriers to entry for criminal organizations into this lucrative criminal enterprise.'

Of course, many businesses and government departments do not just hand over the ransom that is demanded. De Groot (2019) reports that, in March 2016, 9,800 machines at Ottawa Hospital were infected and a ransom demanded. However, the hospital had a

systematic back-up regime and recovery processes in place, which enabled it to wipe its hard drives, remove the malware and avoid paying the criminals. Similarly, in December 2016 an attack on the San Francisco Transportation Agency affected the bus management system and train ticketing, with criminals demanding US$73,000 in Bitcoin. The agency also had a rigorous back-up system and responded rapidly to resolve the issue without making payment. These examples demonstrate the ebb and flow of malware development and security responses to it.

In 2019, Tidy (2019) reported on the work of Fabian, a worker at cyber security company Emsisoft. Fabian creates anti-ransomware software, which victims can download and run to regain access to their locked files. Because his work interferes with and disrupts the activities of cyber-criminals, he is very careful about personal safety. The potential dangers of becoming well known as an enemy of gangs was brought home in 2018, when he found comments referring to him by name embedded within ransomware code. Yet he also saw this as evidence that the cyber-criminals recognized the effectiveness of his work: 'I'm not going to lie, yeah, it was nice. It's clear that the coder is really pissed. They've taken the time and effort to write a message knowing that I'll probably see it and I'm clearly getting under their skin. It's a pretty good motivator to know that my work is upsetting some really nasty cyber-criminal gangs.'
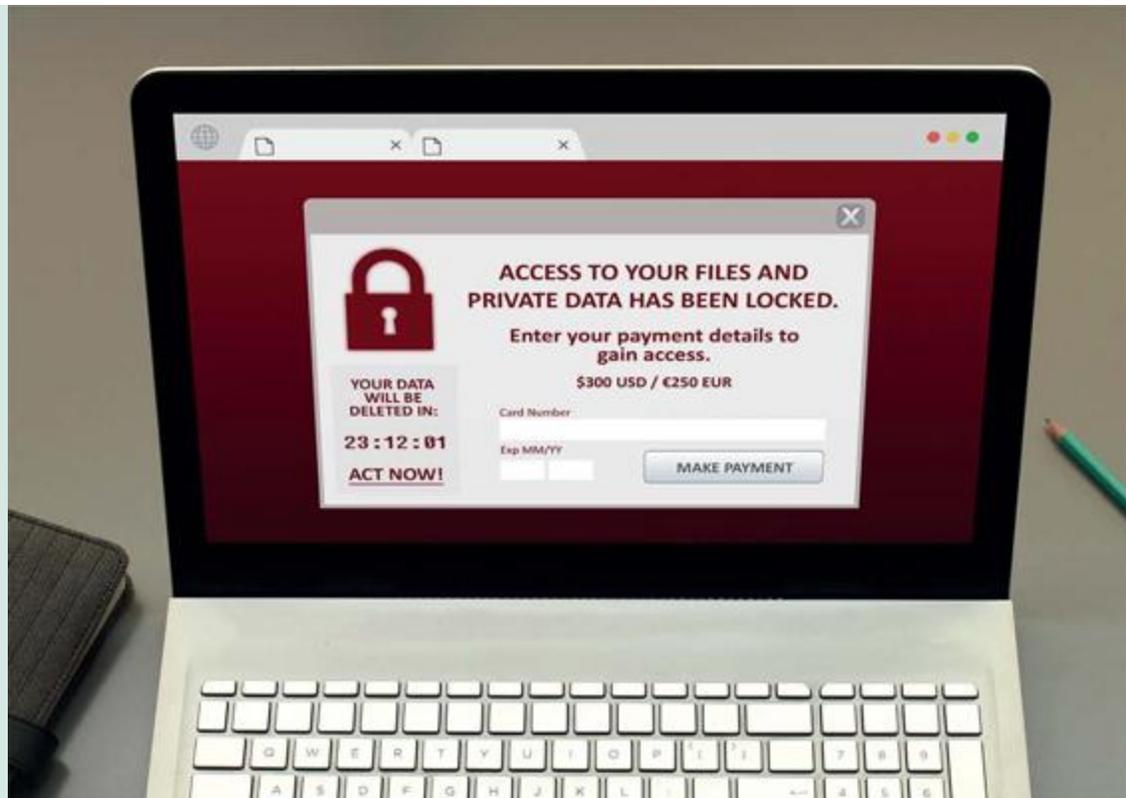
Security experts today argue that the next stage of ransomware criminality may involve the rapidly expanding but much less secure Internet of Things. Liska and Gallo (2017: 21) provide a glimpse into this next stage: 'Imagine a world where you head out to drive to work, but your fridge was turned off overnight so your cream for your coffee spoiled, and your car won't start until you pay the ransom to have it unlocked. It's not that far-fetched and not that far away if we don't find ways to more effectively protect those devices from criminal actors.'

THINKING CRITICALLY

Fabian's company specializes in cracking ransomware code to tackle cyber-criminality. Why might police forces be unable to take on this kind of work? What does this example tell us about how cybercrime is changing the face of policing in the twenty-first century?

Conclusion: globalization, deviance and social order

Globalization and the ongoing digital revolution continue to transform the landscape of crime, making new demands on policing and regulatory bodies, most of which have developed in local or national contexts. The emergence of the Darknet – part of the internet that common search engines do not reach and can only be accessed with a 'Tor' browser that enables anonymous communication – facilitates the sale of weapons, illegal and prescription drugs, and stolen credit card details and the sharing of child pornography. Monitoring and policing the Darknet is just one of the new challenges for authorities today, alongside organized crime, terrorist networks and state-sponsored international crime (Roth 2017).

Yet it would be a mistake to regard crime and deviance in a wholly negative light. Any society which recognizes that people have diverse values and concerns must find space for those whose activities do not conform to the norms of the majority. People who develop new ideas in politics, science, art or other fields are often regarded with suspicion or hostility. The political ideals developed in the French Revolution – individual liberty and equality – were fiercely resisted but today are widely accepted around the world. To deviate from dominant norms takes courage and resolution but often secures changes that are later seen to be in the general interest. But is 'harmful deviance' also the price a society must pay when it allows considerable freedom for people to engage in non-conformist pursuits? Are high rates of criminality inevitable if citizens are allowed so much personal freedom?

Such questions take us right back to the ideas of Emile Durkheim and the earliest sociological studies of crime and deviance. Although it may be imagined that entirely novel theories are now required to understand the new forms of crime and deviance covered in this chapter, we should remember that even cybercrimes are still committed by individual people and groups, not (yet) by computers or

forms of artificial intelligence. As Downes et al. (2016: 20) argue, 'No particular theoretical perspective can cover every facet of crime and deviance yet stay practical and coherent, although there are always those who proclaim that one theory alone should be allowed to dominate. Neither are older, occasionally unfashionable, theories necessarily as weak as their later critics would have one believe.' Hence, the established sociological theories still have much to offer in this complex field of inquiry.

❓ **Chapter review**

1. Provide a definition of 'crime'. Why might definitions of crime not be confined to actions that break the criminal law?

2. What are the main differences between the sociology of crime and deviance and criminology?

3. Durkheim suggests that a certain level of deviance is not only inevitable but functional for society. How could sociologists measure levels of 'dysfunctionality'?

4. Explain Robert Merton's 'strain theory' of criminality. Given the recent financial crisis and austerity measures taken by governments, does Merton's thesis predict increasing or decreasing levels of 'acquisitive crime'? Was he right?

5. Labelling theorists focus on secondary deviance. Why do they do this? Construct an argument in favour of studying primary deviance in order to understand the individual motivation to commit offences.

6. How did the 'new criminology' try to provide a 'fully social' theory of crime? On what basis was this theory challenged by 'Left Realists'?

7. Environmental criminologies focus on the design of crime-resistant environments. Give some examples. What role, if any, is there for sociologists in this process?

8. Why are police-recorded crime figures not an accurate picture of the extent of crime? In what ways are victim surveys more reliable?

9. Describe the gendered pattern of crime using evidence from the criminal statistics in this chapter. What reasons have been offered for the disproportionate number of males committing crimes?

10. Explain the difference between white-collar crime and corporate crime. How might it be argued that corporate crime is more

harmful to society on every measure than 'street crime'?

11. Define what is meant by a 'true cybercrime' and provide some examples. How has globalization facilitated the growth of organized crime?

🔍 [Research in practice](#)

Prisons have often been called 'universities of crime' in which offenders can learn how to become better criminals. High levels of reoffending may seem to lend support to this characterization, even though it is exactly the opposite of the official aims of the prison system. Numerous research studies have also found that incarceration has many negative and harmful effects on the families of prisoners. Yet a smaller number of studies point to the potential for familial relationships to improve during a period of incarceration for one of its members. The article below explores why this may be the case.

McCarthy, D., and Adams, M. (2019) 'Can Family–Prisoner Relationships Ever Improve During Incarceration? Examining the Primary Caregivers of Incarcerated Young Men', *British Journal of Criminology*, 59(2): 378–95; https://academic.oup.com/bjc/article/59/2/378/5106170.

1. How would you characterize this study? What were the researchers trying to find out?

2. The study focused on 'primary caregivers'. Who are they and why are they seen as particularly important? How did the team gain access to this group?

3. In what ways did the interviewees suggest that incarceration had had unexpected, positive consequences for their family relationships?

4. What evidence is there that primary caregivers respond differently to the incarceration of their family member than do other family members? How could this be explained?

5. Suggest ways in which the findings of this study could be used to inform penal policy to help to reduce reoffending.

⚙ **Thinking it through**

Robert Reiner (2015) suggests that defining what 'crime' means is not as simple as politicians' rhetoric often assumes. He argues that there are 'at least' five constructions of crime:

- *legal* – action or omission that are offences punishable by law

- *normative* – actions which cause serious harm, whether or not they are punishable by law

- *social/cultural* – those acts which are widely considered deviant within a particular society

- *criminal justice* – those crimes processed by the criminal justice system that result in an unrepresentative sample being labelled as 'criminals'

- *mass media* – those offences, perpetrators and victims which appear most often in the mass media and may bear little relation to the official statistics.

Provide some examples of 'crime' based on each version. Are these five constructions of crime just different and incompatible? Which construction or constructions do the theoretical perspectives of crime – functionalist, interactionist, conflict theory, control theory – tend to focus on? Try to distil a single definition or construction of crime that every perspective would be able to work with.

⭐ [Society in the arts](#)

Watch Peter Mullan's 2010 film *NEDS*, which tells the story of John McGill growing up in 1970s inner-city Glasgow. McGill's journey takes him from school 'swot' to gang member, involved in violence, knife culture, crime, and what today would be called antisocial behaviour. What does the film have to say about the following themes:

- the seriousness of the harm caused by antisocial behaviour
- the role of the police and social control agencies in preventing or increasing levels of crime and deviance
- the deterrent effect of the prison system on young people's choices and decisions
- the interactional process of labelling and its role in creating deviant identities
- theories of young people's crime and deviance?

Is this purportedly 'socially realistic' movie actually supported by research evidence from criminology and the sociology of deviance?

Further reading

A good place to start is Tony Lawson and Tim Heaton's (2009) *Crime and Deviance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan). Robert Reiner's (2016) *Crime: The Mystery of the Common-Sense Concept* (Cambridge: Polity) provides a concise guide to the varied meanings of 'crime'. *Shades of Deviance: A Primer on Crime, Deviance and Social Harm* (2014), edited by Rowland Atkinson (Abingdon: Routledge), is diverse, with many useful chapters, and Sandra Walklate's (2011) *Criminology: The Basics* (2nd edn, Abingdon: Routledge) is a very useful textbook dealing with criminological theories and research.

For crime in the British context, Hazel Croall's (2011) *Crime and Society* (2nd edn, London: Longman) is an excellent survey. Another comprehensive book is *Criminology: A Sociological Introduction* (2014) by Eamonn Carrabine, Pamela Cox, Pete Fussey, Dick Hobbs, Nigel South, Darren Thiel, and Jackie Turton (3rd edn, London: Routledge). For theories of crime and deviance, David Downes, Paul Rock and Eugene McLaughlin's (2016) *Understanding Deviance* (7th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press) is probably the best resource.

Two good reference works are *The Sage Dictionary of Criminology* (2019), edited by Eugene McLaughlin and John Muncie (3rd edn, London: Sage), which is exactly what it says. Then the most authoritative text is Alison Liebling, Shadd Maruna and Lesley McAra's (2017) indispensable collection of essays in *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology* (6th edn, Oxford: Oxford University Press).

For a collection of original readings on crime and deviance, see the accompanying *Sociology: Introductory Readings* (4th edn, Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

@ **Internet links**

Additional information and support for this book at Polity:
www.politybooks.com/giddens9

The British Journal of Criminology **– one of the world's top criminology journals:**
https://academic.oup.com/bjc

Critical Criminology (USA) – for the 'new' criminology and its later development:
www.critcrim.org/

An independent 'public interest charity' promoting the centrality of social justice, based in London, UK:
www.crimeandjustice.org.uk

EU Agency for Fundamental Rights – some useful materials on hate crimes across the EU:
https://fra.europa.eu/en/themes/hate-crime

World Prison Brief – an international database of prison statistics hosted by the Institute for Criminal Policy Research at Birkbeck, University of London:
www.prisonstudies.org/

The Howard League for Penal Reform – a UK penal reform charity:
https://howardleague.org

NACRO – UK charity concerned with crime prevention and the welfare of offenders:
www.nacro.org.uk

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime – lots of information on various types of international and organized crime:
www.unodc.org/unodc/index.html?ref=menutop

Glossary

A

Absolute poverty

Poverty as defined in terms of the minimum requirements necessary to sustain a healthy existence.

Achieved status

Social status based on an individual's effort rather than on traits assigned by biological factors. Examples include 'veteran', 'graduate' or 'doctor'.

Affective individualism

The belief in romantic attachment as a basis for contracting marriage ties.

Age–crime curve

Describes the consistent finding that involvement in criminality increases during adolescence, peaks in the mid- to late teenage years, but then falls back, decreasing as people move into adulthood.

Age-grade

The system in small-scale cultures in which people belonging to a similar age group are categorized together and have similar rights and obligations.

Ageing

The combination of biological, psychological and social processes that affect people as they grow older.

Ageism

Discrimination or prejudice against a person on the grounds of age.

Agencies of socialization

Social contexts within which processes of socialization take place. The family, peer groups, schools, the media and the workplace are key socializing agencies.

Agrarian societies

Societies whose means of subsistence is based on agricultural production (crop-growing).

Alienation

The feeling that we are losing control over our own abilities as human beings. Karl Marx saw alienation under capitalism as workers' loss of control over their labour tasks, the products of their labour, other workers and their essential 'species being'.

Alter-globalization movements

An international or global coalition of groups and protest networks that is opposed to the dominant, neo-liberal, global economy but advocates alternative forms of cooperative globalization under the slogan 'Another world is possible'.

Alternative medicine

Numerous therapies which lie outside orthodox biomedical practice and tend to adopt a holistic approach to health and illness.

Animism

The belief that events in the world are mobilized by the activities of spirits.

Anomie

'Normlesseness' or a lack of social norms. Used by Durkheim to describe desperate feelings of aimlessness and despair provoked by rapid social change, which loosens the hold of existing norms.

Anthropocene

A recently widely accepted new geological era, which acknowledges that human activity has become a key influence on planetary systems.

Anthropogenic climate change

Any significant change in the global climate (mainly global warming) brought about wholly or in part by human activities.

Apartheid

The official system of racial segregation established in South Africa and existing between 1948 and 1994.

Applied social research

Research which not only aims to understand or explain social problems but also contributes to solving them.

Artificial intelligence (AI)

Computerized machines which are able to perform tasks that would normally require human intelligence, such as decision-making,

speech recognition and visual perception.

Ascribed status
Social status based on biological factors, such as race, sex or age.

Assimilation
The acceptance of a minority group by a majority population, in which the former adopts the values and norms of the dominant culture.

Assisted dying
An option being sought by campaigners that would allow terminally ill people (who meet certain criteria) to take prescribed life-ending medication.

Asylum-seeker
A person who has applied for refuge in a foreign country because of fear of religious or political persecution in his or her country of origin.

Atavism
In criminology, a nineteenth-century theory that criminals display traits held over from the history of human evolution and which accounts for their criminality.

Austerity politics
The framework of discussion or *discourse*, which developed after the 2008 global financial crisis, that focuses on reducing the budget deficits of governments through a mix of public spending cuts and tax increases.

Authoritarian states
Political systems in which the needs and interests of the state take priority over those of citizens and participation in politics is severely limited or denied.

Authority
Following Max Weber, the legitimate power which one person or a group holds over another. Authority depends on the acceptance by subordinates of the right of those above them to give orders or directives.

Automation

Production processes monitored and controlled by machines with only minimal supervision from people.

B

Back region
An area away from 'front region' performances (such as staff rest rooms in restaurants), where individuals are able to relax and behave in an informal way.

Bias
Generally a preference or an inclination, especially one that inhibits impartial judgement. In statistical sampling or testing, an error caused by systematically favouring some outcomes over others.

Big data analytics
The process of analysing very large datasets to uncover patterns, trends and correlations.

Binuclear family
Family structure in which a child has parents living in two different homes after separating, with both still involved in the child's upbringing.

Biodiversity
The diversity of species of life forms on planet Earth.

Biographical research
Research that takes individual lives or life histories as the main focus. Oral histories, life stories, autobiographies and biographies are examples.

Biomedical model
A set of principles underpinning Western medical systems and practices. Biomedicine defines diseases objectively via the presence of recognized symptoms and treats illness according to scientific principles.

Bisexual
An orientation of sexual activities or feelings towards people of either sex.

Black feminism
A strand of feminist thought highlighting the multiple disadvantages of gender, class and race which shape the experiences of non-white

women. Black feminists reject the idea of a single unified gender oppression experienced evenly by all women.

Blended family

A family in which at least one adult has children from a previous relationship. Also commonly called a 'step-family' or 'reconstituted family'.

Bureaucracy

Hierarchical organizational form based on a pyramid of authority. According to Weber, modern bureaucracy is the most efficient type of large-scale human organization and thus is likely to spread.

C

Capitalism
An economic system based on profit-seeking and market exchange. 'Capital' refers to any asset, including money, property and machines, which can be used to produce commodities for sale or be invested in a market with the hope of achieving a profit.

Capitalists
Those who own the means of production – companies, land, stocks and shares – and use these to generate an economic return.

Caste
A form of stratification in which an individual's social position is fixed at birth and cannot be changed. India's caste system has been established for the longest time.

Causal relationship
A relationship in which one state of affairs – the effect – is brought about by another – the cause.

Causation
The causal influence of one factor on another. Causal factors in sociology include the reasons individuals give for what they do, as well as external influences on their behaviour.

Childhood
The early period of a person's life, usually divided into stages (such as infant, child, youth), leading towards adulthood. Childhood is always subject to social construction.

Church
A large body of people belonging to an established religious organization. Churches normally have a formal structure with a hierarchy of religious officials.

Cisgender
A term denoting people whose gender identity and/or performance correspond with that which is assigned at birth or according to dominant norms of masculinity and femininity.

City

In modern times, the largest form of human settlement. In sociological theory, 'a sociological entity that is formed spatially', characterized by loose social bonds and the rational, matter-of-fact attitudes of its inhabitants.

Civil inattention
The process whereby individuals in the same physical setting, without being threatening or overly friendly, demonstrate to one another that they are aware of one another's presence.

Civil partnership
A legally sanctioned relationship between two people of the same sex; it gives same-sex couples legal recognition as well as some or all of the rights of married couples.

Civil society
The realm of activity between the state and the market, including family, schools, community associations and noneconomic institutions.

Civilizing process
A theory of social change in the work of Norbert Elias, linking the formation of European nation-states with the pacification of society, changes in the internalized emotional controls of individuals, and social codes of manners.

Class
For Marx, a group of people standing in a common relationship to the means of production as owners or non-owners. Weber saw class as an economic category but stressed its interaction with social status and the affinities of 'party' affiliation. More recent definitions stress occupation, the ownership of property and wealth or lifestyles.

Class consciousness
The process through which the working classes in capitalist societies would become aware of their subordinate and exploited class position. In Marxist theory, this is a necessary step towards revolution.

Cloud computing

The practice of using a service over the internet, via remote datacentres which store, manage and process data, rather than an individual device.

Cognition

Human thought processes involving perception, reasoning and remembering.

Cohabitation

Two people living together in a sexual relationship of some permanence without being married to each other.

Cohort

A group of people sharing common experiences within a certain period of time, usually in 'birth cohorts' – people born in the same year or few years.

Cold War

The conflictual relationship between the USA and the Soviet Union, together with their allies, from the late 1940s until 1990. The period was known as the 'Cold War' because the two sides never engaged in direct military confrontation with each other.

Collective behaviour

Group activities that normally emerge spontaneously, such as crowds, riots, crazes and panics.

Collective consumption

A concept used by Manuel Castells, referring to the consumption of common goods promoted by the city, such as transport services and leisure amenities.

Collective effervescence

The sense of heightened energy created in collective gatherings and rituals, used by Durkheim to explain the religious experience as essentially social.

Colonialism

The process through which Western nations established their rule in parts of the world far away from their home territories.

Communication

The transmission of information from one individual or group to another, including face-to-face conversation, the use of language and

bodily cues, and print and electronic media such as internet chatrooms and smartphones.

Communism

Theoretically, a society characterized by communal ownership of the means of production and distribution. Usually associated with Karl Marx and used to describe the former Soviet Union and much of Eastern Europe.

Comparative questions

Questions concerned with drawing comparisons between one context in a society and another, or contrasting examples from different societies, for the purposes of sociological theory or research.

Comparative research

Research that compares a set of findings about one society with the same type of findings about other societies.

Complicit masculinity

Raewyn Connell's term for a type of masculinity embodied by many men who do not live up to the ideal of 'hegemonic masculinity' yet benefit from its dominant position in the gender order.

Compulsion to proximity

A need felt by individuals to interact with others in face-to-face settings rather than at a distance.

Concrete operational stage

A stage of cognitive development in Piaget's theory, in which the child's thinking is based primarily on physical perception of the world rather than abstract concepts or hypothetical situations.

Conflict theories

Sociological theories which focus on the tensions, divisions and competing interests that are present in all human societies as groups struggle to gain access to and control scarce resources.

Confluent love

Active and contingent forms of love, as opposed to the 'forever' qualities of romantic love.

Consumer society

A type of society which promotes the consumption of mass-produced products, partly through the ideology of consumerism, which suggests that increasing mass consumption is beneficial for all.

Control theory

A theory which sees crime as the outcome of an imbalance between impulses towards criminal activity and the controls which deter it. Criminals are seen as rational beings who maximize rewards unless rendered unable to do so through social or physical controls.

Controls

Statistical or experimental means of holding some variables constant in order to examine the causal influence of other variables.

Conurbation

A clustering of towns or cities in an unbroken urban environment.

Convenience sampling

The arbitrary selection of respondents for a study, based on simple opportunity rather than a rigorous quest for representativeness; used to study hard-to-reach social groups.

Conversation analysis

The empirical study of conversations, employing techniques drawn from ethnomethodology. Conversation analysis tries to uncover the organizational principles of talk and its role in the social order.

Core countries

According to world-systems theory, the most advanced industrial countries, which take the lion's share of profits from the world economic system.

Corporate crime

Offences and major harm committed by large corporations in society, including pollution, false advertising and violations of health and safety regulations.

Correlation

A regular relationship between two dimensions or variables, often expressed in statistical terms. Correlations may be positive or negative. A positive correlation exists where a high rank on one variable is regularly associated with a high rank on the other. A

negative correlation exists where a high rank on one variable is regularly associated with a low rank on the other.

Cosmopolitanism

A concept describing the shift beyond nation-state-based thinking towards analysing the human world as a single community.

Created environment

Those aspects of the physical world deriving from the application of technology, such as cities and towns involving roads, railways, factories, offices, private homes and other buildings.

Crime

Any action that contravenes the laws established by a political authority.

Criminalization

The processes through which certain individuals, groups or behaviour become categorized as criminal and therefore subject to legal sanctions.

Criminology

The study of forms of behaviour that are sanctioned by criminal law and justice systems.

Crip theory

A branch of disability theory which examines literary and artistic products as well as everyday life, uncovering the embedded and unspoken 'ableist' assumptions within these. Crip theory draws from queer theory to destabilize existing discourses of disability, which are seen as 'ableist'.

Crisis of masculinity

The idea that traditional forms of masculinity are being undermined and that young men are unsure of themselves and their role in society.

Critical race theory (CRT)

A perspective on ethnic relations which begins from the premise that racism is embedded in legal systems and other social institutions and is the normal, everyday experience of many minority ethnic groups.

Critical realism

An approach to science which insists on the existence of an objective external reality that is amenable to investigation (contrast with social constructionism). Critical realists look to uncover the underlying causes of observable events, which are not usually directly observable.

Crude birth rate

A basic statistical measure representing the number of births within a given population per year, normally calculated in terms of the number of births per 1,000 members.

Crude death rate

A statistical measure representing the number of deaths that occur annually in a given population per year, normally calculated as the ratio of deaths per 1,000 members.

Cult

A fragmentary religious grouping to which individuals are loosely affiliated but which lacks any permanent structure. Cults quite often form round an inspirational leader.

Cultural capital

Types of knowledge, skills and education which confer advantages on those who acquire them. Cultural capital can be embodied (in forms of speech or bodily comportment), objectified (in cultural products such as works of art) or institutionalized (in educational qualifications).

Cultural pluralism

The coexistence of numerous cultures within a given society.

Cultural reproduction

The transmission of cultural values and norms from generation to generation. Cultural reproduction refers to the mechanisms by which continuity of cultural experience is sustained across time.

Culture of poverty

The thesis that poverty is not the result of individual inadequacies but the outcome of being socialized into a wider culture that transmits values, beliefs, lifestyles, habits and traditions common among people in conditions of material deprivation.

Cyberbullying

The targeting, harassment and threatening of people via digital technologies, including social media, chatrooms, email and text messaging.

Cybercrime

Criminal activities conducted through electronic networks or involving the use of new information technologies. Electronic money laundering, personal identity theft and electronic hacking are types of cybercrime.

Cyberspace

Electronic networks of inter-action between individuals at different computer terminals, linking people in a dimension that crosses space and territorial boundaries.

D

Dataveillance
> The practice of following a data trail, or harvesting data relating to individuals and groups, for the purpose of monitoring activities, usually for commercial ends or as part of state surveillance.

Decommodification
> In the context of welfare provision, the degree to which welfare services are free of market principles. In a commodified system, welfare services are treated as commodities to be sold on the market.

Deforestation
> The destruction of forested land, often by commercial logging.

Deinstitutionalization
> The process by which individuals cared for in state facilities are returned to their families or to community-based residences.

Democracy
> A political system providing for the participation of citizens in political decision-making, often by the election of representatives to governing bodies.

Demographic transition
> An interpretation of long-term population change, which suggests a series of stages in the ratio of births to deaths, culminating in population stability once a certain level of economic prosperity has been reached.

Demography
> The study of the characteristics of human populations, including their size, composition and dynamics.

Denomination
> A religious sect which has lost its revivalist dynamism and has become an institutionalized body commanding the adherence of significant numbers of people.

Dependency culture

A term popularized by Charles Murray to describe the way that reliance on welfare benefits undermines individuals' capacity to forge a living through their own efforts.

Dependency ratio

The ratio of people of dependent ages (children and the elderly) to people of economically active ages. *Old-age* and *young-age* ratios can be independently calculated.

Dependent variable

A variable, or factor, causally influenced by another (the independent variable).

Desertification

Instances of intense land degradation resulting in desert-like conditions over large areas.

Deskilling

The process through which the skills of workers are downgraded or, over time, eliminated and taken over by machines and/or managers.

Developed countries

Those high-income countries that have undergone a process of industrialization and have relatively high GDP per capita and high living standards.

Developing countries

Those low-income countries which have relatively low GDP per capita and have not yet industrialized as fully as the developed societies.

Developmental questions

Questions posed by sociologists trying to understand the origins and paths of development of social institutions from the past to the present.

Deviance

Actions which do not conform to the norms or values held by most of the members of a group or society. What is regarded as 'deviant' varies widely across societies.

Deviancy amplification

The consequence when an agency of control unintentionally provokes more (amplifies) deviant behaviour.

Diaspora

The dispersal of an ethnic population from an original homeland into foreign areas, often in a forced manner or under traumatic circumstances.

Differential racialization

The history and experience of different ethnic groups in relation to the stereotypes and characterizations of them deployed at various times by the dominant groups in societies.

Digital divide

Inequality in access to digital devices, computing, the internet and online services. Digital inequality particularly disadvantages older people, but it also tends to mirror existing social inequalities of class, disability, race and ethnicity.

Digital revolution

A shift and its social consequences, which began in the second half of the twentieth century, away from analogue, mechanical and electronic devices to digital electronics, particularly in computerized systems.

Digital sociology

A field of sociology that studies (and involves) digital media use in daily life, often employing online data (such as blogs, social media posts, etc.) to better understand social life.

Direct action

A form of political action, associated with new social movements, in which activists protest at the actual site of the issue at hand – for instance, climate change activists clamping themselves to aircraft on runways rather than lobbying MPs.

Disability studies

A field of inquiry that investigates the position of disabled people in society, including their experiences, their history and campaigns, and their organizations.

Discourse analysis

A general term covering several approaches to the study of the impact of language in society. Most sociological versions aim to

understand language use within specific social and historical contexts.

Discourses
The frameworks of thinking in a particular area of social life. For instance, the discourse of criminality refers to dominant ways of thinking about and discussing crime.

Discrimination
Actions which deny to the members of a particular group the resources or rewards that are available to the majority.

Disengagement theory
A functionalist theory of ageing which holds that it is functional for society to remove people from their traditional roles when they become elderly, thereby freeing up those roles for others.

Displacement
The transferring of ideas or emotions from their true source to another object.

Division of labour
The division of a production or economic system into specialized work tasks or occupations, creating economic interdependence.

Doubling time
The time it takes for a particular level of population to double.

Dramaturgical analysis
Goffman's approach to the study of social interaction, based on the use of metaphors derived from the theatre.

Dualism
Literally, the condition of being divided into two parts. In sociological theorizing, dualisms include mind and body, individual and society, structure and agency, micro and macro.

Dysfunctions
Features of social life that challenge or create tensions in a social system.

E

Eco-efficiency
The development of technologies that generate economic growth, but which do so at minimal cost to the natural environment.

Ecological citizenship
A relatively recent extension of citizenship to include the rights and responsibilities of people towards the natural environment or 'nature'.

Ecological modernization
Economic development that also incorporates environmental protection. Advocates of ecological modernization argue that economic growth and ecological protection are not incompatible.

Economic capital
In Pierre Bourdieu's work, resources such as money, property or land that form part of a system of material exchange.

Economic interdependence
The outcome of specialization and the division of labour, when people come to depend on one another for the things they need to sustain their lives.

Economic recession
Typically, the decline of economic activity – often measured in GDP – for two or more consecutive months.

Economic sociology
The study of economic phenomena, including markets, corporations, finance and work, using sociological theories and concepts.

Economy
The system of production and exchange which provides for the material needs of individuals living in a given society. Economic systems differ markedly; capitalism has become the most dynamic and widely adopted system in the contemporary world.

Education

A social institution which promotes and enables the transmission of knowledge and skills across generations.

Egocentric

Egocentric thinking involves understanding objects and events in the environment solely in terms of a very young child's own position.

Elaborated code

A form of speech, typical of the middle classes, involving the deliberate and constructed use of words to designate precise meanings, that is adaptable to various cultural settings.

Elite

A small, more or less cohesive social group that rules over the majority of people in a society.

Embodiment

In sociology, the notion that self-experience and identity are bounded by individual bodies which express and partly shape self-identities.

Embourgeoisement thesis

The process through which middle-class aspirations and styles of life become institutionalized within the working class.

Emigration

The movement of people out of one country in order to settle in another.

Emphasized femininity

In Raewyn Connell's writings, emphasized femininity is an important complement to hegemonic masculinity, because it is oriented to accommodating the interests and needs of men. Many representations of women in the media embody emphasized femininity.

Empirical investigation

Factual inquiry carried out in any given area of sociological study.

Encounter

A meeting between two or more individuals in a situation of face-to-face interaction. In modern societies, many encounters involve strangers rather than friends and family.

Endogamy
The forbidding of marriage or sexual relations outside one's social group.

Endogenous
In sociology, things which develop or originate within the society being studied rather than being introduced from outside (exogenous).

Environment
The non-human, natural world within which human societies exist. In its broadest sense, the environment is the planet Earth.

Environmental criminology
An approach to crime reduction and prevention focusing on designing crime-resistant environments rather than trying to reform criminals.

Environmental issues
All of those issues in society which involve both social relations and non-human, natural phenomena – that is, they are hybrids of society and nature.

Environmental justice
The idea that all people have the right to a healthy and sustainable environment. Campaigns have focused on removing the disproportionate environmental risks borne by poor communities.

Epidemic
The occurrence of an infectious disease which spreads rapidly throughout a particular community.

Epidemiology
The study of the distribution and incidence of disease and illness within a population.

Essentialism
The assumption that human behaviour and/or social phenomena can be explained with reference to a fixed 'human nature' or some other immutable and universal biological element(s).

Estate
A form of stratification involving inequalities between groups of individuals established by law.

Ethnic cleansing
The creation of ethnically homogeneous territories through the mass expulsion of other ethnic populations.

Ethnicity
A form of social identity related to 'descent and cultural differences' which become effective or active in certain social contexts.

Ethnie
A term used by Anthony Smith to describe a group that shares ideas of common ancestry, a common cultural identity and a link with a specific homeland.

Ethnocentrism
Understanding the ideas or practices of another culture in terms of one's own. Ethnocentrism judges other cultures negatively in comparison with the host culture.

Ethnography
The study of people at first hand using participant observation or interviewing.

Ethnomethodology
The study of how people make sense of what others say and do in the course of day-to-day social interaction. Ethnomethodology is concerned with the 'ethnomethods' by means of which human beings sustain meaningful interchanges with one another.

Euthanasia
The intentional ending of a person's life in order to relieve extreme suffering.

Evangelicalism
A form of Protestantism characterized by a belief in spiritual rebirth (being 'born again').

Experiment
A research method in which a hypothesis can be tested in a controlled and systematic way, either in an artificial situation constructed by the researcher or in naturally occurring settings.

Exploitation
A social or institutional relationship in which one party benefits at the expense of the other through an imbalance in power.

Extended family

A family group consisting of more than two generations of close relatives living in the same household or in close and continuous relationships with one another.

External risk

Hazards that spring from the natural world and are unrelated to the actions of humans, such as droughts, earthquakes, famines and storms.

F

Factual questions
> Questions that raise issues concerning matters of fact rather than theoretical or moral issues.

Fake news
> Information, presented as news, that is either wholly false or contains deliberately misleading elements within the content.

Family
> A group of individuals related to one another by blood ties, marriage or adoption that form a unit, the adult members of which are responsible for the upbringing of children.

Family displays
> All of the ways by which people demonstrate to others that they are engaged in appropriate 'family' practices and relationships.

Family practices
> All of those activities engaged in by people which they perceive to be related to family life.

Fecundity
> A measure of the number of children that it is biologically possible for a woman to produce.

Feminist theories
> Those theories which emphasize the centrality of gender for any analysis of the social world. All strands of feminist theory share the desire to explain gender inequalities in society and to work to overcome them.

Fertility
> The average number of live-born children produced by women of childbearing age in a particular society.

Field
> In Pierre Bourdieu's work, the social contexts within which people struggle for competitive advantage and dominance using various forms of capital. Each field has its own set of rules: for instance, art

and art appreciation has a very different set of rules to that of business.

Figurational studies
A theoretical perspective, stemming from the work of Norbert Elias, which dispenses with philosophical forms of thinking, insisting that sociology is a distinct subject that studies people and the interdependent relations they form with one another.

Figurations
In figurational sociology, the social patterns formed by the interweaving of people who are inevitably in relations of interdependence with one another.

Flexible production
Process in which computers design customized products for a mass market.

Focus group
A small group of people, selected from a larger sample, to take part in a discussion on topics of interest to the researcher.

Focused interaction
Interaction between individuals engaged in a common activity or a direct conversation with one another.

Fordism
The system of production and consumption, pioneered by Henry Ford, involving the introduction of the moving assembly line, linking methods of mass production to the cultivation of a mass market for the goods produced, such as Ford's Model T car.

Formal operational stage
According to Piaget, a stage of cognitive development at which the growing child becomes capable of handling abstract concepts and hypothetical situations.

Front region
A setting of social activity in which individuals seek to put on a definite 'performance' for others.

Functionalism
A theoretical perspective based on the idea that social institutions can best be explained in terms of the functions they perform – that

is, the contributions they make to the continuity of a society.

Fundamentalism

A religious belief in returning to the literal meanings of scriptural texts; the term is also used to describe movements based on this belief.

G

Gender
Social expectations about behaviour regarded as appropriate for the members of each sex, conventionally as masculine or feminine.

Gender dysphoria
A situation in which an individual experiences distress on account of the perceived mismatch between biological sex and gender identity.

Gender inequality
The differences in the status, power and prestige that women and men have in groups, collectivities and societies.

Gender order
A term associated with the writings of R. W. Connell to represent the structured power relations between masculinities and femininities that exist in society.

Gender regime
The configuration of gender relations within a particular setting, such as a school, a family or a neighbourhood.

Gender relations
The societally patterned interactions between men and women.

Gender roles
Social roles assigned to each sex and labelled as masculine or feminine.

Gender socialization
The processes through which individuals develop different gender characteristics in the course of socialization.

Generalized other
In the work of George Herbert Mead, when the individual takes over the general values of a given group or society during the socialization process.

Generation
The whole group of individuals who are born and are living at the same time. Generations are born into and their experience is shaped

by a particular society.

Genetically modified organisms

Plants or crops that have been produced through manipulation of the genes that compose them.

Genocide

The systematic, planned attempt to destroy a racial, political or cultural group.

Gentrification

A process of urban renewal in which older, decaying housing is refurbished by affluent people moving into the area.

Gig economy

A sector of the economy characterized by short-term, zero-hours or freelance contracts, in which workers are paid per 'gig' rather than being permanent employees.

Glass floor

The ability of affluent parents in the higher social class groups to use their resources to protect their children from downward mobility.

Global city

A city, such as London, New York or Tokyo, which has become an organizing centre of the new global economy.

Global commodity chains

A worldwide network of labour and production processes yielding a finished product.

Global economic inequality

Inequality of income and material standards of life between the nation-states of the world. Many studies of global economic inequality concentrate on the differences between the developed and the developing countries.

Global governance

The framework of rules and norms governing international affairs and the diverse set of institutions needed to guarantee this framework.

Global North/Global South

The roughly drawn geographical division of the world's societies which highlights global inequalities, especially between the mainly industrialized North and the postcolonial countries of the South.

Global village

An idea associated with Marshall McLuhan, who saw the spread of electronic communication (such as TV and the internet) as binding the world into a coherent single community.

Global warming

The gradual increase in average temperature at the surface of the Earth. Although the 'greenhouse effect' occurs naturally, global warming implies an enhanced greenhouse effect resulting from human activity.

Globalization

Growing interdependence between different peoples, regions and countries as social and economic relationships come to stretch worldwide.

Glocalization

The mix of globalizing processes and local contexts which often leads to a strengthening rather than a diminishing of local and regional cultures.

Government

We can speak of 'government' as a process or of 'the government' to refer to political authorities overseeing the implementation of their policies by officials. In most modern societies, political authorities are elected and their officials appointed on the basis of expertise and qualifications.

Grand theories

Theories which attempt to arrive at an overall explanation of social life and/or overall social development. Karl Marx's theory of class conflicts as the driving force of history is the best example.

Greenhouse effect

The build-up of heattrapping gases within the Earth's atmosphere. A 'natural' greenhouse effect keeps the Earth's temperatures at a comfortable level, but the build-up of high concentrations of

greenhouse gases through human activities has been linked to rapid global warming.

Greying
A term used to indicate that an increasing proportion of a society's population is becoming elderly.

Gross domestic product (GDP)
All the goods and services produced by a country's economy in a particular year.

Gross national income (GNI)
GDP plus net property income (interest, rent, dividends and profits) from abroad. GNI is now used in preference to GNP – gross national product – which is an older measure.

Group closure
The means whereby a group establishes a clear boundary for itself and thereby separates itself from other groups.

H

Habitus
In Pierre Bourdieu's work, the set of dispositions (including ways of thinking and acting) which members of particular social groups and social classes acquire, largely unconsciously, by virtue of living in similar objective conditions.

Hate crimes
Criminal acts (such as assaults) targeting members of a specific social group purely because of that membership. Hate crimes include attacks on members of religious or ethnic groups, gay men and lesbians, disabled people and others.

Health technologies
Material (such as prosthetic limbs and ultrasound scanning) and social (such as fasting and dieting) interventions aimed at achieving a state of socially defined 'good health'.

Health transition
The shift from predominantly acute, infectious diseases to chronic non-infectious diseases as the main cause of death in a society.

Hegemonic masculinity
In Raewyn Connell's work, the dominant form of masculinity within the gender hierarchy. In most Western societies today, hegemonic masculinity is associated with whiteness, heterosexuality, marriage, authority and physical toughness.

Heteronormativity
The dominant assumption and set of attitudes in a society that there are two genders (male and female) and that heterosexuality is the 'natural' norm.

Heterosexuality
An orientation in sexual activity or feelings towards people of the opposite sex.

Hidden curriculum
Traits of behaviour or attitudes that are learned at school, but not through a formal curriculum. The hidden curriculum is the

'unstated agenda' conveying, for example, aspects of gender differences.

Higher education
Education beyond school level, in colleges or universities.

High-trust systems
Organizations or work settings in which individuals are permitted a great deal of autonomy and control over the work task.

Homeless people
Those who have no permanent residence and sleep over with friends and family, are temporarily housed by the state, or sleep in free shelters or public places. A small proportion of the homeless are 'rough sleepers'.

Homophobia
An irrational fear or hatred of homosexuals.

Homosexual masculinity
According to Connell, forms of masculinity associated with gay men which are stigmatized and located at the bottom of the gender hierarchy for men.

Homosexuality
The orientation of sexual activities or feelings towards others of the same sex.

Housework
Unpaid work carried out, usually by women, in the home: domestic chores such as cooking, cleaning and shopping.

Human trafficking
The forced movement of people across national borders or within countries for the purposes of sexual exploitation, labour, begging, adoption or delinquency. Most trafficked people are women, young adults and children.

Hunting and gathering societies
Societies whose mode of subsistence is gained from hunting animals, fishing, and gathering edible plants.

Hyperreality

The 'more real than real', hyperreality results from the spread of electronic communications, as there is no longer a separate 'reality' to which representations refer.

Hypothesis

An idea, or an educated guess, about a given state of affairs, put forward in exact terms to provide the basis for empirical testing.

Hypothetico-deductive method

A model of scientific practice which posits that science begins with a general hypothesis or theory about the world from which specific, testable hypotheses can be deduced and tested against observable evidence.

I

Iatrogenesis

‘Physician-caused illness’. Ivan Illich saw clinical, social and cultural forms. Clinical iatrogenesis is when people become ill as a consequence of medical treatment. Social and cultural iatrogenesis occur as medicine becomes powerful and dominant, deskilling ordinary people, who become dependent on medical professionals.

Ideal type

A ‘pure type’, constructed by emphasizing certain traits of a given social phenomenon into an analytical model which does not necessarily exist anywhere in reality. An example is Max Weber’s model of bureaucratic organization.

Identity

The distinctive aspects of a person’s character which relate to who they are and what is meaningful to them. The main sources are gender, sexual orientation, nationality or ethnicity, and social class.

Ideology

Shared ideas or beliefs which serve to justify the interests of dominant groups.

Immigration

The movement of people into one country from another for the purpose of settlement.

Impression management

People’s attempt to ‘manage’ or control the impressions others have of them by choosing what to conceal and what to reveal.

Incest

Sexual activity between close family members.

Independent variable

A variable, or factor, that causally influences another (the dependent variable).

Individual model of disability

A model which holds that individual limitations are the main cause of the problems experienced by disabled people: bodily

'abnormality' is seen as causing some degree of 'disability' or functional limitation.

Induction

A model of scientific practice which posits that scientists gather evidence from which patterns may be observed. General theories may follow which provide explanations for the observations and patterns.

Industrial Revolution

The broad spectrum of social, economic and technological transformations that surrounded the development of modern forms of industry in the mid-eighteenth and the early twentieth century.

Industrial societies

Societies in which the vast majority of the labour force works in industrial production or associated employment sectors.

Industrialization

The replacement of human and animal labour with machines, beginning with the development of modern forms of industry in factories, machines and large-scale production processes.

Infant mortality rate

The number of infants who die during the first year of life, per 1,000 live births.

Informal economy

Economic transactions carried on outside the sphere of orthodox paid employment.

Informalization

The social process through which formal codes of manners and behaviour, characteristic of an earlier period, lose their hold, resulting in a wider range of acceptable behaviours.

Information technology

Forms of technology based on information processing and requiring microelectronic circuitry.

Institutional racism

The collective failure of organizations to provide services to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin. This can involve processes, attitudes and behaviour and can intentionally or

unwittingly generate prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantages minority ethnic people.

Interactional vandalism

The deliberate subversion of the tacit rules of conversation.

Intergenerational equity

A concept based on the idea that fairness and justice should apply across generations. Current concern relates to disadvantages experienced by younger generations.

Intergenerational mobility

Movement up or down a social stratification hierarchy from one generation to another.

International governmental organization (IGO)

An international organization established by treaties between governments for the purpose of conducting business between the nations making up its membership.

International non-governmental organization (INGO)

An international organization established by agreements between the individuals or private organizations making up its membership.

Internet

A global system of connections between computers allowing people to communicate with one another and find information on the worldwide web by visuals, sounds and text.

Internet-based learning

Educational activity connected through the medium of the internet.

Internet of Things

The insertion of internet capability into everyday objects and devices (and novel devices) that allow the sending and receiving of data without additional human involvement.

Interpretative sociology

Several approaches to the study of society, including symbolic interactionism and phenomenology, which investigate the meaningful character of social life for its participants.

Intersectionality

The study of multiple oppressions and their impact. For instance, where class and ethnicity or gender and class overlap, people may face deeper and more complex forms of inequality.

Interviews

One-to-one conversations aimed at eliciting information about some aspect of social life. Interviews can be structured, semi-structured or open-ended depending on the kind of information being sought.

Intragenerational mobility

Movement up or down a social stratification hierarchy within the course of an individual career.

Iron law of oligarchy

A term coined by Robert Michels, meaning that large organizations always centralize power in the hands of a small minority.

J

Job insecurity

A sense of apprehension experienced by employees about both the stability of their work position and their role within the workplace.

K

Kinship

Relationships which link individuals through blood ties, marriage or adoption. Kinship relations are involved in marriage and the family but extend much more broadly.

Knowledge economy

A society no longer based primarily on the production of material goods but, rather, on the production of knowledge in universities and research facilities, which is applied to production.

Knowledge society

Another common term for the information society – a society based on the production and consumption of knowledge and information.

Kuznets Curve

A formula, advanced by the economist Simon Kuznets, showing that inequality increases during the early stages of industrial capitalism, then declines, and eventually stabilizes at a relatively low level.

L

Labelling theory
An approach to the study of deviance which suggests that people become 'deviant' in part through the application of labels by others.

Latent functions
Functional consequences that are not intended or recognized by the members of a social system in which they occur.

Lateral mobility
Movement of individuals from one region of a country to another, or across countries.

Left Realism
A strain of criminology, popularized in the 1980s by the work of Lea and Young, that focused on the victims of crime and called for socialist criminology to engage with issues of crime control and social policy.

Legitimacy
The acceptance by those being governed that a given situation is just and valid.

Lesbianism
Same-sex activity or attachment between women.

Liberal democracy
A system of democracy based on parliamentary institutions, coupled to the free market system in the area of economic production.

Liberal feminism
A type of feminist theory that sees gender inequality as the product of reduced access for women and girls to equal rights. Liberal feminists seek solutions through legislative change.

Life course
The various transitions people experience over their lives. Such transitions vary widely across history and cultures, thus the life course is socially as well as biologically shaped (contrast with life cycle).

Life cycle
The common-sense view that all human beings pass through the same biological stages from birth to death (contrast with life course).

Life expectancy
The length of time, on average, that people can expect to live. Specifically, the number of years a newborn infant can be expected to live if prevailing patterns of mortality stay the same throughout life.

Life histories
Studies of the overall lives of individuals, often based on both selfreporting and documents such as letters or diaries.

Lifelong learning
The idea that learning and the acquisition of skills should occur at all stages of an individual's life, not simply in the compulsory, formal educational system. Adult continuing education programmes, mid-career training, internet-based learning opportunities, and community-based 'learning banks' are all forms of lifelong learning.

Lifespan
The maximum length of life that is biologically possible for a member of a given species.

Lifestyle choices
Decisions made by individuals about their consumption of goods, services and culture; these are seen by many sociologists as important reflections of class positions.

Lifeworld
The everyday world of routine, lived experience. A concept devised by Alfred Schutz, it forms the basic subject matter of phenomenological sociology.

Literacy
The ability to read and write.

Logical positivism
A philosophy of science which focuses on deductive reasoning and empirical verification and adopts a correspondence theory of truth

which demands that scientific statements are 'true' only if they correspond exactly with real-world phenomena.

Low-trust system

An organizational or work setting in which individuals are allowed little responsibility for, or control over, the work task.

M

Macrosociology
The study of large-scale groups, organizations or social systems.

Majority/minority worlds
Umbrella terms to describe collectively the societies of the Global South, which constitute the majority of the world's population, and those of the Global North, which form the minority; an alternative conceptualization of the commonly used 'developed' and 'developing' countries.

Male breadwinner
Until recently, in many developed societies the traditional role of the man in providing for the whole family through employment outside the home. The 'male breadwinner model' has declined in significance with the steady growth in the number of women entering the labour market.

Male inexpressiveness
The difficulties men have in expressing, or talking about, their feelings to others.

Malestream sociology
Most of the sociological theories and research before the feminist interventions of the 1960s and later, which paid scant regard to women or issues of gender relations.

Malthusianism
The idea, first advanced by Thomas Malthus in 1798, that population growth tends to outstrip the resources available to support it. Malthus argued that people must limit their frequency of sexual intercourse to avoid a future of misery and starvation.

Manifest functions
The functions of a type of social activity that are known to and intended by the individuals involved in the activity.

Manufactured risk
Dangers created by the impact of human knowledge and technology on the natural world. Examples include global warming and genetically modified foods.

Market-oriented theories

Theories about economic development which assume the best possible economic consequences will result if individuals are free to make their own economic decisions, uninhibited by governmental constraint.

Marriage

A socially approved sexual relationship between two individuals. Marriage has been restricted to people of opposite sexes, but in some cultures certain types of homosexual marriage are allowed. Recently, many developed societies have moved towards the acceptance of gay marriage.

Masculinity

The set of expected behaviours and norms, attributes and characteristics associated with men and boys in a particular society. Masculinity is not fixed but changes over time.

Mass customization

The large-scale production of items designed for particular customers through the use of new technologies.

Mass media

Forms of large-scale communication, such as newspapers, magazines, radio and television, designed to reach mass audiences.

Mass production

The production of long runs of goods using machine power. Mass production was one outcome of the Industrial Revolution.

Master status

The status or statuses that generally take priority over other indicators of social standing and determine a person's overall position in society.

Materialist conception of history

The view developed by Marx according to which 'material' or economic factors have a prime role in determining historical change.

Mature adulthood

In modern societies, the period of individual lives between the late thirties and retirement age, typically characterized by formal

employment and the formation of a family.

Means of production

The means whereby the production of material goods is carried on in a society, including not just technology but the social relations between producers.

Means-tested benefits

Welfare services that are available only to citizens who meet certain criteria based not only on need but also on levels of income and savings.

Mechanical solidarity

According to Durkheim, an early form of social solidarity characterized by similarities and the subsumption of individualism within the collectivity.

Media convergence

The increasing intertwining of previously separate and distinct forms of media.

Media imperialism

A version of imperialism enabled by communications technology, claimed by some to have produced a cultural empire in which media content originating in the industrialized countries is imposed on less developed nations which lack the resources to maintain their cultural independence.

Median

The number that falls halfway in a range of numbers – a way of calculating central tendency that is sometimes more useful than calculating a mean.

Medical gaze

In modern medicine, the detached and value-free approach taken by medical specialists in viewing and treating a sick patient.

Medicalization

The process through which 'normal' behaviours, such as hyperactivity in children, come to be defined and treated as medical conditions.

Megacities

A term favoured by Manuel Castells to describe large, intensely concentrated urban spaces that serve as connection points for the global economy.

Megalopolis

A term meaning 'city of all cities', coined in ancient Greece to refer to a city-state that was planned to be the envy of all civilizations. Used in modern times to refer to very large – or overlarge – conurbations.

Melting pot

A model of migration based on the idea that ethnic differences can be combined to create new patterns, with flourishing, diverse cultural sources.

Meritocracy

A system in which social positions are filled on the basis of individual merit and achievement rather than on ascribed criteria such as inherited wealth or social background.

Meso level

A level of social reality between the micro and the macro. Often said to include families, groups and organizations.

Metanarratives

Broad, overarching theories or beliefs about the operation of society and the nature of social change.

Microsociology

The study of human behaviour in contexts of face-to-face interaction.

Middle class

A broad spectrum of people working in professional, managerial and administrative occupations with associated norms, values and lifestyles.

Minority ethnic group

A group of people who, because of their physical or cultural characteristics, find themselves in situations of discrimination or inequality. Minority ethnic groups are not necessarily in a numerical minority.

Mixed methods

The use of both quantitative and qualitative research methods as part of a single research study.

Mobilities

A sociological perspective that analyses the movement of things, people and information rather than focusing on relations between static, national societies.

Mode of production

Within Marxism, the constitutive characteristic of a society based on the socio-economic system predominant within it – for example, capitalism, feudalism or socialism.

Modern slavery

All forms of slavery-like practices that are common in the contemporary world, including sex trafficking, forced domestic labour, forced marriage and debt bondage.

Modernity

The period following the mid-eighteenth-century European Enlightenment, characterized by the combination of secularization, rationalization, democratization, individualism and the rise of scientific thinking.

Modernization theory

A version of market-oriented development theory which argues that low-income societies develop economically if they adopt modern economic institutions, technologies, and cultural values that emphasize savings and productive investment.

Monarchies

Those political systems headed by a single person whose power is passed down through their family across generations.

Monopoly

A situation in which a single firm dominates in a given industry.

Monotheism

Belief in a single God.

Moral consensus

The shared values emphasized by functionalists which, they argue, are necessary for a well-ordered society.

Moral panic

A term popularized by Stan Cohen to describe a societal overreaction to a certain group or type of behaviour that is taken as symptomatic of general social disorder.

Mortality rate

The death rate in a society, usually expressed as number of deaths per 1,000 head of population.

Multiculturalism

Adoption by the state of a policy encouraging and facilitating cultural pluralism, which allows all ethnic groups to share equally in economic and political life.

N

Nation

A group of people bound together by a strong sense of shared values, cultural characteristics such as language and religion, and a perceived common history.

Nation-state

A particular type of state in which a government has sovereign power within a defined territorial area and the mass of the population are citizens who know themselves to be part of a single national community.

National populism

A 'thin' political ideology combining nationalism and right-wing political positions. Also the political parties rooted in this ideological position.

Nationalism

A set of beliefs, political ideas and movements expressing identification with a given national community and pursuing the interests of that community.

Nations without states

Instances in which the members of a nation lack political sovereignty (a state) over the area they claim as their own.

Nature

Generally taken today to be the non-human environment of animals, plants, seas and land.

Neoliberalism

The economic belief that free market forces, achieved by minimizing government restrictions on business, provide the only route to economic growth.

Netiquette

The emerging body of advice, rules and norms governing online communications, particularly those on email and social media sites.

New Age movement

The diverse spectrum of beliefs and practices oriented towards inner spirituality, including paganism, Eastern mysticism, shamanism, alternative forms of healing and astrology.

New criminology

The 'new criminologists' of the 1970s argued that crime and deviance could be understood only in the context of power and inequality within society. Crime was therefore often political in character.

New media

All of those media forms founded on digital technology and digitization – mobile and smartphones, the internet, digital TV, and radio and video games.

New migration

A term referring to changes in patterns of migration in Europe in the years following the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall, altering the dynamic between traditional 'countries of origin' and 'countries of destination'.

New racism

Racist attitudes, also referred to as cultural racism, predicated on perceived cultural or religious differences rather than biological ones.

New religious movements (NRMs)

The broad range of religious and spiritual groups, cults and sects that have emerged alongside mainstream religions.

New social movements (NSMs)

A group of social movements which emerged in Western societies in the 1960s and 1970s, including student movements, second-wave feminism, environmentalism, the anti-nuclear movement and 'anti-globalization' demonstrations. NSMs exhibit new social issues, loose organizational form, a new middle-class base and non-violent action repertoires.

New sociology of childhood

A paradigm that emerged in the late 1980s and the 1990s which begins from the premise that childhood is a social construction that differs across societies.

New Urban Sociology
From the 1970s, an approach to the study of urban life and development that draws from Marx, Marxism and political economy rather than the urban ecology perspective of the Chicago School.

Newly industrializing countries
Those developing countries, such as South Korea, Taiwan, Brazil and Singapore, which have rapidly developed a strong industrial base and economy.

Non-Aligned Movement
A large group of countries that align themselves neither with nor against major power blocs such as the USA or Russia/the former Soviet Union. The movement was formed in 1955 and today has 120 members.

Non-binary
Gender identities that are neither exclusively male nor exclusively female and lie outside of this binary distinction.

Non-verbal communication
Communication between individuals based on facial expression or bodily gesture rather than on the use of language.

Norms
Rules of behaviour that reflect or embody a culture's values, either prescribing a given type of behaviour or forbidding it.

Nuclear family
A family group consisting of mother, father (or one of these) and dependent children.

O

Occupation
Any form of paid employment in which an individual works in a regular way.

Occupational gender segregation
The way that men and women are clustered in different types of jobs, based on prevailing understandings of what is appropriate 'male' and 'female' work.

OECD
Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development – an international organization formed in 1961. The OECD aims to assist its members to achieve 'sustainable economic growth' and employment.

Offshoring
The relocation of businesses, business operations or work tasks from one country to another. The practice has recently spread from the manufacturing to the service sector, largely facilitated by the digital revolution.

Oral history
Information gathered through interviews with people about events they witnessed or experienced earlier in their lives.

Organic solidarity
According to Emile Durkheim, a form of social cohesion that results from the various parts of a society functioning as an integrated whole, particularly through the extended division of labour.

Organized crime
Types of activity which are similar to orthodox businesses but are illegal, including human trafficking, illegal gambling, drug trading, prostitution, large-scale theft and protection rackets.

Outsourcing
The contracting out of a company's work tasks, previously carried out internally, from simple tasks, such as the production of one part of a product, to the work of whole departments.

P

Pandemic

According to the World Health Organization, an epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries and affecting a large number of people.

Paradigm

In science, a framework of theoretical assumptions about the world within which scientific practice and the training of new scientists takes place.

Participant observation

A method of research, widely used in sociology and anthropology, in which the researcher takes part in the activities of a group or community being studied.

Participatory culture

A culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement which involves sharing and support for sharing, and which erodes the boundary between active producers and passive consumers.

Participatory democracy

A system of democracy in which all members of a group or community participate collectively in the taking of major decisions.

Party

A group of individuals who work together because they have common backgrounds, aims or interests. According to Weber, party is one factor, alongside class and status, that shapes patterns of social stratification.

Pastoral societies

Societies whose subsistence derives from rearing domesticated animals, though there is often a need to migrate according to seasonal changes.

Patriarchy

A type of societal organization based around the central domestic authority of the father, involving the generalized dominance of men over women.

Pauperization

Literally, to make a pauper of, or impoverish. Marx used the term to describe the process by which the working class grows increasingly impoverished.

Peace processes

All of those activities aimed at preventing violence in post-conflict situations, whether official efforts by professionals or the informal actions of groups in civil society.

Peer group

A friendship group composed of individuals of similar age and social status.

Peripheral countries

Countries that have a marginal role in the world economy and are thus dependent on the core producing societies for their trading relationships.

Personal space

The physical space individuals maintain between themselves and others.

Personality stabilization

According to functionalists, the emotional security provided by the conventional nuclear family for the adult individuals that constitute it.

Phenomenology

A sociological perspective centred on understanding how the taken-for-granted social world is variously experienced by individuals.

Philosophy of science

A branch of philosophy concerned with the basis and practices of science as compared to other forms of knowledge.

Pilot studies

Trial runs in survey research.

Plastic sexuality

Human sexuality freed from the needs of reproduction and moulded by individual choices.

Political economy

Study of the ways in which political institutions of government and economic systems influence each other.

Political party

An organization established with the aim of achieving governmental power by electoral means and using that power to pursue a specific programme.

Politics

The means by which power is employed and contested to influence the nature and content of governmental activities. The sphere of the 'political' includes the activities of government and also those of social movements and other groups.

Portfolio worker

A worker who possesses a diversity of skills or qualifications and is therefore able to move easily from job to job.

Positivism

In sociology, the view that the study of the social world should be conducted according to the principles of natural science. A positivist approach to sociology holds that objective knowledge can be produced through careful observation, comparison and experimentation.

Postcolonial theories/postcolonialism

Social theories which seek both to expose the implicit colonial legacy embedded in mainstream social theory and concepts and to transform these in distinctively post colonial directions by bringing in the forgotten voices and accounts of the colonized.

Post-development

A critical perspective on mainstream theories of development which looks to promote alternative modes of progress in the developing countries to the dominant Western ideas of capitalism and industrialization.

Post-Fordism

A general term used to describe the transition from mass industrial production, characterized by Fordist methods, to more flexible forms of production favouring innovation and aimed at meeting niche markets for customized products.

Post-industrial society

Post-industrial societies are based on services and the production of information rather than material goods. Most developed societies are post-industrial in this sense.

Post-truth politics

A form of political culture characterized by the mistrust of experts, expertise, and a range of establishments and establishment figures in favour of appeals to 'common sense' and emotions.

Postmodern feminism

Postmodern feminism involves, among other things, opposition to essentialism in the study of gender and a belief in plural modes of knowledge.

Postmodernism

A perspective based on the idea that society is not governed by history or progress but is highly pluralistic and diverse, with no 'grand narrative' guiding its development.

Poststructuralism

An approach to social science derived from the field of linguistics and popularized in sociology by the work of Michel Foucault. Poststructuralists reject the idea that absolute truths about the world can be discovered, arguing instead that plural interpretations of reality are inevitable.

Post-violence societies

Those societies that have experienced war or internal communal violence and are moving towards non-violence.

Poverty line

An official measure used by governments to define those living below a certain income level as living in poverty.

Power

Power is a contested concept. For Weber, it is the ability of individuals or groups to achieve their aims or further their interests, even against opposition. Others see power as a pervasive aspect of all human relationships which can be productive as well as destructive (see Foucault).

Precariat

An emerging social class of the twenty-first century, consisting of various social groups and individuals whose life chances are marked by insecurity, unpredictability and instability.

Precautionary principle

The presumption that, where there is sufficient doubt about the possible risks, it is better to maintain existing practices than to change them.

Prejudice

Preconceived ideas about an individual or group; ideas that are resistant to change even in the face of new information. Prejudice may be either positive or negative.

Pre-operational stage

A stage of cognitive development, in Piaget's theory, in which the child has advanced sufficiently to master basic modes of logical thought.

Primary deviance

An initial act of crime or deviance. According to Lemert, acts at the level of primary deviance remain marginal to an individual's self-identity.

Primary identity

Those identities formed in early life such as gender and ethnicity.

Primary socialization

The process by which children learn the cultural norms of the society into which they are born. Primary socialization occurs largely in the family.

Primary source

Any source that is originally produced in the time period which researchers are interested in studying (contrast with secondary source).

Profane

That which belongs to the mundane, everyday world.

Proletariat

For Karl Marx, the working class under capitalism.

Prostitution

The granting of sexual services for monetary gain.

Public sphere

An idea associated with the German sociologist Jürgen Habermas. The public sphere is the arena of public debate and discussion in modern societies.

Pure relationship

A relationship of sexual and emotional equality.

Push and pull factors

In the early study of global migration, internal and external forces believed to influence patterns of migration. 'Push factors' refer to dynamics within the country of origin, such as unemployment, war, famine or political persecution. 'Pull factors' describe features of destination countries, such as a buoyant labour market, a lower population density and a high standard of living.

Q

Qualitative research methods

Those methods which gather detailed, rich data with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the social phenomena being studied.

Quantitative research methods

Those sociological methods which allow social phenomena to be measured and analysed using mathematical models and statistical techniques.

Queer theory

From the 1990s, theories and discourses which oppose gender essentialism, initially aiming to deconstruct the established concepts of sexuality and gender. Queer theorists view sexuality and gender as socially constructed and hence gender and sexual identities are plural, fluid, performative and lacking any 'natural' or fixed location in human biology.

R

Race
A set of social relationships which allow individuals and groups to be located, and various attributes or competencies assigned, on the basis of biologically grounded features.

Racialization
The process through which an understanding of 'race' is used to classify individuals or groups of people to the advantage of some and the disadvantage of others.

Racism
The attribution of characteristics of superiority or inferiority to a population sharing certain physically inherited features, often skin colour. Racist ideas became entrenched during the period of Western colonial expansion but also rest on mechanisms of prejudice and discrimination found in many other human societies.

Radical feminism
A form of feminist theory that believes that gender inequality is the result of male domination in all aspects of social and economic life.

Random sampling
A method in which a sample is chosen so that every member of the population has the same probability of being included.

Rationalization
A concept used by Max Weber to refer to the process by which modes of precise calculation and organization, involving abstract rules and procedures, increasingly come to dominate the social world.

Reconstituted family
A family in which at least one of the adults has children from a previous union, either living in the home or nearby; commonly known as a 'step-family'.

Reference group
A group to which other groups or individuals compare themselves for purposes of evaluation.

Reflexivity

In sociological research studies, the researchers' awareness of how their own ethnicity, class, gender or political views might impact on their practice, along with strategies to mitigate or eliminate such impacts.

Regionalization

Divisions of time and space which may be used to 'zone' activities at the local, domestic level or the larger division of social and economic life into regional settings or zones at a scale either above or below that of the nation-state.

Relative deprivation

The thesis that people's subjective feelings of deprivation are not absolute but related to their assessment of themselves in comparison with others.

Relative poverty

Poverty defined by reference to the overall standard of living in any given society.

Religious economy

A theoretical framework which argues that religions can be fruitfully understood as organizations in competition with one another for resources and followers.

Representative democracy

A political system in which decisions affecting a community are taken not by its members as a whole but by people they have elected for this purpose.

Representative sample

A sample from a larger population that is statistically typical of that population.

Reproductive technology

Techniques of influencing the human reproductive process.

Research methods

The diverse methods of investigation used to gather empirical (factual) information. Numerous research methods are used in sociology, and there is a trend towards 'mixed methods'.

Resistant femininity

A term associated with Raewyn Connell's writings. Women embodying resistant femininity reject the conventional norms of femininity in society ('emphasized femininity') and adopt liberated lifestyles and identities. Feminism and lesbianism, for example, are forms of resistant femininity.

Resource allocation

How different social and material resources are shared out between and employed by social groups or other elements of society.

Resource mobilization theory (RMT)

An American approach to social movement studies which begins from the premise that movements require resources to be successful. Studying how movements gather resources in a competitive field is the basis of the theory.

Response cries

Seemingly involuntary exclamations which individuals make when, for example, being taken by surprise, dropping something inadvertently or expressing pleasure.

Restricted code

A mode of speech that rests on strongly developed cultural understandings, so that many ideas do not need to be – and are not – put into words.

Revolution

A process of political change, involving the mobilizing of a mass social movement, which successfully overthrows an existing regime. Revolutions are distinguished from *coups d'état* because they entail a mass movement. They can involve violence, but in recent times some have also been essentially peaceful or 'velvet revolutions'.

Right Realism

In criminology, Right Realism links the perceived escalation of crime and delinquency to a decline in individual responsibility and moral degeneracy. To Right Realists, crime and deviance are an individual pathology – a set of destructive lawless behaviours actively chosen and perpetrated by individual selfishness, a lack of self-control and morality.

Risk society

A thesis associated with Ulrich Beck, who argued that advanced industrial societies have created many new hazards or manufactured risks unknown in previous ages, such as global warming.

Rituals

Formalized modes of behaviour in which the members of a group or community regularly engage. Religion represents one of the main contexts in which rituals are practised, but the scope of ritual behaviour extends into many other spheres of life.

Romantic love

Romantic love, which emerged in the eighteenth century, involves the idea that marriage is based on mutual attraction rather than economic convenience. It is a prelude to, but is also in tension with, the idea of a pure relationship.

S

Sacred
That which inspires attitudes of awe or reverence among believers in a given set of religious ideas.

Salafism
A school of Sunni Islam with diverse strands, all of which insist that the behaviour of Muslims should match, as far as is possible, that of the first three generations following the death of the Prophet Muhammad.

Sample
A proportion of individuals or cases from a larger population as representative of that population as a whole.

Sanction
A mode of reward or punishment that reinforces socially expected forms of behaviour.

Scapegoating
Blaming an individual or social group for perceived wrongs that generally arise from socio-economic change.

Schooling
A formal process of instruction, usually in specialized organizational settings – schools. Schooling transmits skills and knowledge via a designated curriculum.

Science
Science – and sociology as a scientific endeavour – involves the disciplined marshalling of empirical data, combined with the construction of theories which illuminate or explain those data.

Secondary deviance
An idea associated with Lemert. Secondary deviance is where a label becomes attached to the individual who carried out the act, as where the person stealing from the shop is labelled a 'shoplifter'.

Secondary identity
An identity which is mainly learned; secondary identities include roles and achieved statuses.

Secondary source

Any source which discusses, interprets or re-presents material that originated at an earlier time (contrast with primary source).

Sect

A religious movement which breaks away from orthodoxy.

Secularization

A process of gradual decline in the influence of religion in society. Secularization can refer to levels of involvement with religious organizations, the social and material influence wielded by religious organizations, and the extent to which people hold religious beliefs.

Self-consciousness

Awareness of one's distinct social identity, as a person separate from others. Human beings are not born with self-consciousness but acquire an awareness of self as a result of early socialization.

Semi-peripheral countries

Countries that supply sources of labour and raw materials to the core industrial countries and the world economy but are not themselves fully industrialized.

Sensorimotor stage

According to Piaget, a stage of human cognitive development in which the child's awareness of its environment is dominated by perception and touch.

Service class

A term adopted by John H. Goldthorpe to describe those whose employment is based on a code of service rather than on a labour contract, and whose work therefore involves a high degree of trust and autonomy. The service class refers to professional, senior administrative and senior managerial employees.

Sex

Anatomical differences between males and females. Sociologists often contrast sex with gender, which refers to the socially constructed norms associated with men and women.

Sex tourism

International travel oriented towards procuring prostitution and sexual services. The term usually describes the practices of men

from developed countries who travel for the opportunity to engage in sexual liaisons with women and children.

Sex work

All forms of labour involving the provision of sexual services in a financial exchange between consenting adults.

Sexual harassment

Unwanted sexual advances, remarks or behaviour by one person towards another, persisted in even though it is made clear that such conduct is unwelcome.

Sexual orientation

The direction of one's sexual or romantic attraction.

Sexuality

A broad term which refers to the sexual characteristics, and sexual behaviour, of human beings.

Shared understandings

The common assumptions which people hold and which allow them to interact in a systematic way with one another.

Sick role

A term, associated with Talcott Parsons, to describe the patterns of behaviour which a sick person adopts in order to minimize the disruptive impact of his or her illness on others.

Simulacra

In the theory of hyperreality invoked by Jean Baudrillard, simulacra are copies of items for which there is no original.

Situational crime prevention

An approach to crime prevention that focuses on the creation of crime-resistant environments and communities to reduce the opportunities for people to commit crimes. It is based on the principles of surveillance and target hardening.

Slavery

A form of social stratification in which some individuals are literally owned by others as their property.

Smart city

A city or city region designed with embedded digital technologies, aimed at eliminating some of the chronic problems that bedevil conventional cities, including congestion, poor air quality and a lack of coordination.

Snowball sampling

A method of gathering a sample for research studies based on research participants recruiting acquaintances and friends for the study.

Social ageing

The norms, values and roles that are culturally associated with a particular chronological age.

Social capital

The social knowledge and connections that enable people to accomplish their goals and extend their influence.

Social change

Alteration in the basic structures of a social group or society. Social change is an ever-present phenomenon in social life but has become especially intense in the modern era.

Social closure

The process through which social groups maintain their advantages by implementing criteria that control and exclude who is allowed to join the group. Often seen in professional bodies in high-status occupations.

Social constructionism

An approach to sociological research which sees social reality as the creation of the interaction of individuals and groups.

Social evolution

A theory originally used by nineteenth-century scholars who sought to use evolutionary theory from biology to study the long-term development of societies.

Social exclusion

The outcome of multiple deprivations which prevent individuals or groups from participating fully in the economic, social and political life of the society in which they are located.

Social facts

According to Emile Durkheim, the aspects of social life that shape our actions as individuals. Durkheim believed that social facts could be studied scientifically.

Social gerontology

The study of ageing and the elderly.

Social group

A collection of individuals who interact in systematic ways with one another. Groups may range from very small associations to large-scale organizations or societies. It is a defining feature of a group, whatever its size, that its members have an awareness of a common identity.

Social inequality

The structured, unequal distribution of resources, rewards, opportunities and rights, rooted in major social divisions such as social class, gender, race and ethnicity.

Social interaction

Any form of social encounter between individuals. Social interaction refers to both formal and informal situations in which people meet one another. An illustration of a formal situation of social inter-action is a school classroom; an example of informal interaction is two people meeting in the street or at a party.

Social mobility

Movement of individuals or groups between different socio-economic positions. Vertical mobility refers to movement up or down a hierarchy in a stratification system. Lateral mobility is physical movement of individuals or groups from one region to another.

Social model of disability

A theory that locates the cause of disability within society rather than in the individual. It is not individual limitations that cause disability but the barriers that society places in the way of full participation for disabled people.

Social movement

Collective attempts to further a common interest or secure a common goal through action outside the sphere of established

political institutions. Social movements seek to bring about or block social change and normally exist in relations of conflict with organizations whose objectives and outlook they frequently oppose.

Social position

The social identity an individual has within a given group or society. Social positions may be either general in nature (those associated with gender roles) or more specific (occupational positions).

Social reflexivity

The increasing and continuous reflection of people on the circumstances of their own lives and the choices they must make.

Social reproduction

The process through which a society reproduces its institutional and structural continuity over a long period of time.

Social role

The expected behaviour of an individual occupying a particular social position. In every society, individuals play a number of different social roles according to the varying contexts of their activities.

Social self

The basis of self-consciousness in human individuals, according to the theory of G. H. Mead. The social self is the identity conferred upon an individual by the reactions of others.

Social stratification

The existence of structured inequalities between groups in society, in terms of their access to material or symbolic rewards. While all societies involve some forms of stratification, the most distinctive form in modern societies involves class divisions.

Social structure

Patterns of interaction between individuals, groups and institutions. Most of our activities are structured: they are organized in a regular and repetitive way.

Social theories

Theories of society that do not necessarily develop from within sociology and often contain normative or political critiques of the existing social order.

Social unrest

The stage of dissatisfaction with existing society which can give rise to more focused collective behaviour and social movements.

Socialist feminism

A perspective based on the idea that women are treated as second-class citizens in patriarchal capitalist societies and that both the ownership of the means of production and women's social experience need to be transformed.

Socialization

The social processes through which children develop an awareness of social norms and values and achieve a distinct sense of self. Although socialization processes are particularly significant in infancy and childhood, they continue to some degree throughout life.

Socialization of nature

The process by which we control phenomena regarded as 'natural', such as reproduction.

Society

A system of structured social and institutional relationships within a bounded territory. Societies can be small, numbering a few dozen people, or very large, encompassing hundreds of millions.

Sociological imagination

The application of imaginative thought to the asking and answering of sociological questions. The sociological imagination involves 'thinking oneself away' from the familiar routines of day-to-day life.

Sociological theories

Theories of society or aspects of society which are developed from within professional sociology, using scientific methods and aiming to avoid normative bias.

Sociology

The scientific study of interactions, human groups and whole societies. Sociology is one of a group of social sciences which also includes anthropology, economics, political science and human geography.

Sociology of deviance

The branch of sociology concerned with the study of deviant behaviour and with understanding why some behaviour is identified as deviant.

Sociology of knowledge

A branch of sociology which studies the relationship between human knowledge and the social context from which it emerges and develops.

Sociology of the body

The branch of sociology that focuses on how our bodies are affected by social influences and how embodiment influences individual lives.

Soil degradation

The process by which the quality of the Earth is made worse and its valuable natural elements are stripped away through over-use, drought or inadequate fertilization.

Solidarity

For Durkheim, the internal social forces of cohesion, which can be divided into 'mechanical' and 'organic' forms.

Sovereignty

The title to supreme power of a monarch, leader or government over an area with a clear-cut border.

State

A political apparatus (government institutions, plus civil service officials) ruling over a given territory, with an authority backed by law and the ability to use force. Not all societies are characterized by the existence of a state. The emergence of the state marks a distinctive transition in human history, because the centralization of political power involved in state formation introduces new dynamics into processes of social change.

State-centred theories

Development theories which argue that appropriate government policies do not interfere with economic development but, rather, can play a key role in bringing it about.

State crime

Broadly speaking, criminal or deviant activities committed by governments or state agencies for their own benefit.

Status

The social honour or prestige accorded to a person or a particular group by other members of a society. Status groups normally involve distinct styles of life – patterns of behaviour which the members of a group follow. Status privilege may be positive or negative.

Status set

An individual's group of social statuses.

Stereotypes

Fixed and inflexible characterizations of a group of people based on little or no evidence.

Sticky ceiling

The phenomenon of children born to wealthy and professional families at the top of the income scale being highly likely to stay there, which reduces social mobility from below.

Stigma

Any physical or social characteristic believed to be demeaning.

Strike

A stoppage of work/withdrawal of labour by a group of workers for specific ends.

Structural functionalism

A theoretical perspective rooted in the work of Talcott Parsons. Structural functionalism analyses societies as social systems in which interlinked social institutions perform specific functions, ensuring the smooth operation of the system as a whole.

Structuration

The two-way process by which we shape our social world through our individual actions but are ourselves reshaped by society.

Subalterns

All of those social groups who have been marginalized and silenced by the dominance of Western imperial and colonial power and its discursive constructions of 'the other' as inferior beings.

Subculture
Any segment of the population which is distinguishable from the wider society by its cultural pattern.

Suburbanization
The development of suburbia, areas of low-rise housing outside inner cities.

Super-diversity
A concept used in studies of racial and ethnic diversity within a society to describe a level of complexity surpassing anything that has been experienced previously.

Surveillance
The supervising of the activities of some individuals or groups by others in order to ensure compliant behaviour.

Survey
A method of sociological research usually involving the administration of questionnaires to a population being studied and the statistical analysis of their replies to find patterns or regularities.

Sustainable city
A type of city designed to minimize the input of energy and other resources and to reduce its output of wastes, including CO_2 and pollutants. Sustainable cities aim to reduce their ecological footprint as far as is practicable.

Sustainable development
The notion that economic growth should proceed only insofar as natural resources are recycled rather than depleted, biodiversity is maintained, and clean air, water and land are protected.

Sweatshop
A derogatory term for a factory or shop in which employees work long hours for low pay under poor conditions.

Symbolic capital
In the work of Pierre Bourdieu, those resources that confer high status, distinction, honour and social prestige on people. For example, voluntary charity work may lead to a person being held in

high esteem that would not otherwise have accrued from their formal employment or business ownership.

Symbolic interactionism

A theoretical approach, developed by G. H. Mead, which emphasizes the role of symbols and language as core elements of all human interaction.

T

Target hardening
Crime-deterrence techniques that aim to make it more difficult for crime to take place through direct interventions into potential crime situations. Vehicle immobilizers and CCTV are examples.

Taylorism
A set of ideas, also referred to as 'scientific management', developed by Frederick Winslow Taylor, according to which productivity could be immensely increased by breaking down industrial tasks into a series of simple operations that could be precisely timed and optimally coordinated.

Technology
The application of knowledge to production from the material world. Technology involves the creation of material instruments (such as machines) used in human interaction with nature.

Telecommunications
The communication of information, sounds or images at a distance through a technological medium.

Terrorism
Usually, violent acts designed to instil fear into a population for political ends.

Theoretical questions
Questions posed by the sociologist when seeking to explain a particular range of observed events. The asking of theoretical questions is crucial to allow us to generalize about the nature of social life.

Theory
An attempt to identify general properties that explain regularly observed events. While theories tend to be linked to broader theoretical approaches, they are also strongly influenced by the research results they help generate.

Third Way
A political philosophy, pioneered by New Labour and favoured by other centrist democratic leaders, committed to preserving the

values of socialism while endorsing market-based policies for generating wealth and reducing inequality.

Three worlds model

An older model dividing the world into first, second and third worlds: a first world of countries with high levels of economic development, a second world of emerging economies, and a third world of poorer countries in the southern hemisphere with little or no industrial development.

Total institutions

A term popularized by Erving Goffman to refer to facilities, such as asylums, prisons and monasteries, that impose on their residents a forcibly regulated system of existence in complete isolation from the outside world.

Totemism

A system of religious belief which attributes divine properties to a particular type of animal or plant.

Transgender

A term which covers a variety of people exhibiting 'gender variance', including those whose gender identity and/or performance of gender diverges from that assigned at birth or expected according to dominant social norms of femininity and masculinity.

Transnational corporations (TNCs)

Business corporations located in two or more countries. Even when TNCs have a clear national base, they are oriented to global markets and global profits.

Triangulation

The use of multiple research methods as a way of producing more reliable empirical data than are available from any single method.

Typification

A concept used by Alfred Schutz to describe the way that people make judgements of individuals, based on prior assumptions about the typical character and behaviour of categories of people.

U

Underclass
A class of individuals situated right at the bottom of the class system, often composed of people from ethnic minority backgrounds.

Underdevelopment
A concept used in social science to describe the economic state of societies that were exploited and/ or previously colonized by Western countries. Underdevelopment suggests a process through which powerful, wealthy states actively exploit the poor and less powerful.

Underemployment
The situation where workers are unable to work for the number of hours they wish to, or that is typical for that sector.

Unemployment
The state of being out of formal, paid employment. Rates of unemployment measure the proportion of people who are 'economically active' but also available for work. A person who is 'out of work' is not necessarily unemployed. Housewives, for instance, do not receive any pay, but they usually work very hard.

Unfocused interaction
Interaction occurring among people present in the same setting but who are not engaged in direct face-to-face communication.

Unintended consequences
All of those unpredicted effects that result from the intentional actions of people, organizations and governments, especially those that work against the original objectives of the actors involved.

Universal benefits
Welfare benefits that are available equally to all citizens, regardless of their level of income or economic status, as opposed to being means-tested.

Upper class
A social class broadly composed of the more affluent members of society, especially those who have inherited wealth, own large

businesses or hold large numbers of stocks and shares.

Urban ecology

An approach to the study of urban life based on an analogy with the adjustment of plants and organisms to the physical environment. According to ecological theorists, the various neighbourhoods and zones within cities are formed as a result of natural processes of adjustment on the part of urban populations as they compete for resources.

Urban recycling

The refurbishing of deteriorating neighbourhoods by encouraging the renewal of old buildings and the construction of new ones on previously developed land, rather than extending out to fresh sites.

Urban renewal

Reviving deteriorating neighbourhoods by such processes as recycling land and existing buildings, improving the urban environment, managing local areas better and with the participation of local citizens, and using public funds both to regenerate the area and to attract further private investment.

Urbanism

A term used by Louis Wirth to denote the distinctive characteristics of urban social life, such as its impersonality.

Urbanization

The development of towns and cities.

V

Value-added model of social movements

Neil Smelser's stage model of social movement development in which each succeeding stage 'adds value' to the movement's overall development.

Values

Ideas held by human individuals or groups about what is desirable, proper, good or bad. Differing values represent key aspects of variations in human culture. What individuals value is strongly influenced by the specific culture in which they happen to live.

Variable

A dimension along which an object, individual or group may be categorized, such as income or height, allowing specific comparisons with others or over time.

Vertical mobility

Movement up or down a hierarchy of positions in a social stratification system.

Vicarious religion

The situation in which an active minority of people attend church regularly on behalf of and with the tacit approval of the non-active majority.

Victimization studies

Surveys aimed at revealing the proportion of the population that has been victimized by crime over a certain period. Victim surveys attempt to compensate for the 'dark figure of unreported crime' by focusing directly on people's actual experience of crime.

Virtual community

Internet-based groups, rooted in public discussions which are long-lasting and contain sufficient human feeling to constitute personal relationships in cyberspace.

W

War

The clash of at least two organized armed forces that seek to destroy each other's power and especially their will to resist, principally by killing members of the opposing force.

Welfare dependency

A situation where people on welfare, such as those receiving unemployment benefit, treat this as a 'way of life' rather than attempting to secure a paid job.

Welfare state

A political system that provides a wide range of welfare benefits for citizens.

White-collar crime

Criminal activities carried out by those in white-collar or professional jobs.

Work

The activity by which human beings produce useful things from the natural world and so ensure their survival. In modern societies there remain many types of work, including housework, which do not involve direct payment of wages or salary.

Working class

A social class broadly composed of people involved in blue-collar or manual occupations.

World-accommodating movement

A religious movement that emphasizes the importance of inner religious life and spiritual purity over worldly concerns.

World-affirming movement

A religious movement that seeks to enhance followers' ability to succeed in the outside world by helping them to unlock their human potential.

World-rejecting movement

A religious movement that is exclusive in nature, highly critical of the outside world, and demanding of its members.

World-systems theory

Pioneered by Immanuel Wallerstein, this theory emphasizes the interconnections among countries based on the expansion of a capitalist world economy. The world-system is made up of core countries, semi-peripheral countries and peripheral countries.

Y

Young adulthood

A life course stage between adolescence and mature adulthood. Young adulthood is not seen as a universal life course stage, but the concept has some currency in the developed societies.

Youth culture

The specific cultural forms associated with young people in a given period. Youth culture involves behavioural norms, dress codes, language use and other aspects, many of which tend to differ from the adult culture of the time.

Z

Zemiology

In criminology, the study of all of the various causes of social harm rather than just those harms caused by crimes and criminal acts.

Zero-tolerance policing

An approach to crime prevention and control that targets petty crime and minor disturbances as a way of deterring more serious crime.

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