

Preface

There is no getting around it: Introductory textbooks are both hard to read and hard to write. They cover a vast range of complex topics. The users generally have little or no background in the social sciences, yet are suddenly expected to grasp not only a new way of seeing the world, but also the many details about various theories and historic events. As soon as students begin to wrap their head around a certain topic—say the genetic basis of human behaviour—it’s on to the next chapter and a completely different topic. So many topics, so little time. Those who teach introductory courses know the challenge of making the complexities of social analysis meaningful to students without trivializing or oversimplifying.

I began to write this book back in 1994, thinking that it would be a breeze—I’d taught introductory sociology for so long that I naïvely thought I’d just take my course notes and quickly convert them into a text. Two years later, the task was completed and the first edition of this book was published. Without a doubt, the person who learned the most from that book was me. Each subsequent edition of the book has been both a challenge and an adventure.

My goal has always been to make the book interesting to students and relevant to their lives. Of course, I’ve also brought the contents of each new edition up to date, providing both new data and current social thought. For this edition there have been some substantial changes made to the book. The chapter order has been altered slightly, with the chapter that explains social class (Chapter 5) now preceding the chapter that details life in modern capitalism (Chapter 6). Chapter 9 has been renamed to more closely reflect its content. I have also reduced the amount of material on the history and political economy of capitalism; in its place I have expanded the sociological analysis of the culture of capitalism (Chapter 6). In addition, a number of new topics have been added, including White privilege and Islamophobia (Chapter 11), a brief history of feminism (Chapter 12), the shift from the “me generation” to the “i-generation” (Chapter 6), and the implications of climate change (Chapter 13). I’ve also briefly introduced more ideas of classical social thinkers such as Max Weber, Adam Smith, Ferdinand Tönnies, John Locke, George Herbert Mead, and Charles Horton Cooley.

New for this edition is an introductory section called “Getting the Most

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from *Your Textbook and Your Course*.” My many years as a teacher of first-level students helped me understand that poor grades can often be the result of deficiencies in basic reading and study skills; this section makes some suggestions to help students succeed academically. Also added as an aid to students are four questions at the start of each chapter that lay out some of the main topics to be discussed.

Overall, the book has been made more student-friendly. Many new boxed inserts have been added to provide more down-to-earth examples of theoretical content. The list of definitions has been expanded. Several chapters, such as Chapter 1, have been reorganized to make the contents easier to understand. The language throughout the text has been simplified wherever possible, and some topics have been deleted. My son—now a university student—was one of my most important editors. Whenever he said, “Mom, no one’s going to understand that point” or “Mom, that’s got to go,” I took it out or rewrote it.

To the Professor

I have received a great deal of feedback from colleagues and students over the four editions of this book. While I often initially resisted suggestions for change, it usually turned out that the criticisms were valid. I retired from full-time teaching in 2004. In some ways it made revising this book more difficult, as I no longer have regular student input. However, being out of the classroom has allowed me to see the book from a different point of view. In the past I would cover a topic from the perspective of my own teaching methods and course content. For this edition I saw the book in more universal terms. As a result, some topics suddenly *did* seem too complex or detailed for first-level students. I hope my new approach has made the book more accessible to them. As always, some worthwhile topics could not be included simply because of length restrictions. I would hope that professors who use this book do not feel bound by either the book’s contents or its order.

Although not all instructors use the “Think About It” questions with their classes, I have left them in for this edition. From a pedagogical point of view, I find their greatest value is that they slow readers down for a brief moment, forcing them to ponder a point or consider its implications.

To the Student

The book you are about to read is the result of the many years I spent teaching introductory sociology courses. I think you will find that it is different from most other introductory sociology textbooks. For starters, it assumes that the majority of you will not be pursuing careers in sociology. As a result, you’re likely to be more interested in understanding the social world than the field itself. Thus this book does not deal extensively with either social theory or methodology.

Most introductory textbooks offer what I refer to as the “smorgasbord” approach to learning: put everything on the “table” and let the student have

a “taste” of a wide array of theories and topics. However, if you think of the times you have actually eaten this kind of buffet meal, you will probably agree that the quantity of food usually surpassed its quality; you put too much on your plate; it all dissolved into a gigantic mush; and you ended up with indigestion. In contrast, this book will attempt to give you a selective “meal,” but hopefully a memorable one.

You are about to embark on an adventure in learning. Chances are, the orientation of this book is new to you, and its approach may challenge many of your taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. As noted in the first chapter, this is exactly what sociology is meant to do—it should shake us up. Keep in mind that this is not a theology textbook, and you are not expected to become a “believer.” Sociology is about learning to ask the right questions, to be sceptical, and to weigh and judge different social analyses. Most importantly, sociology is a field that challenges students to engage with their social world. As this book makes abundantly clear, the world we live in today was made by those who came before us, but the future is in our hands. In order to change the world we must first understand how it works. This book is a small attempt to start you on that path.

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