AUSTRALIAN SOCIOLOGY

4

a changing society

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PREFACE

Welcome to the fourth edition of *Australian Sociology: A Changing Society.*

This book provides an overview of the discipline of sociology through an analysis of Australian society. In doing so, it draws on a diverse range of perspectives as well as myriad topics that go to issues at the core of Australian social life.

Some of these issues, such as social division and inequality, raise questions about the structure of Australian society; while others, such as health, religion, media, work and deviance, point to how this structure is reproduced over time.

The study of social structure inherits perspectives that have survived since the founding of sociology as a discipline. These perspectives, which are presented in the sociological theory chapter in a more compact form—now located at the end of the volume—continue to frame the way sociology adapts to social change. But the study of altogether new social realities, such as the speed of globalisation today, profound changes in the nature of identity in the modern world, and the global threat to social organisation posed by climate change, requires new and interdisciplinary forms of analysis.

In this edition, recent changes affecting traditional divisions of class, race, ethnicity and gender have been documented and analysed with the latest statistics. The rise of neo-liberalism, and the impact of globalisation on education are covered, while the sociological implications of new education policies are also examined. Economic models of education delivery are investigated, such as the changing funding formulas for secondary schools and the emergence of free courses at universities delivered by MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses). Perhaps the most extensive revisions are evident in the chapter on class, not simply with the statistics but by exploring new ways of measuring class stratification. Global inequality is also re-examined in the chapter on globalisation and the city—much expanded in the world today, with more than half the world's population living in metropolitan cities.

Three chapters that stand out for the way they suggest a shift in the field of sociology itself are Personal Lives (Chapter 8), Changing the Climate: Modernity at Its Limits (Chapter 15) and From Mass Media to Social Media (Chapter 14). The former chapter is premised on the observation that the modern 'family' as a unit is no longer recognisable as it once was. The once-heralded social unit of the nuclear family continues its steady decline, as blended families and postmodern living arrangements such as heteronormativity, living alone, living apart together, living with friends, and the living patterns of adult children of divorce become increasingly common forms of the household unit. The importance of friendship networks and the complex influences on personal life have eclipsed the sociology of the family to the point where an entire branch of sociology needs to be recast.

The chapter that perhaps presents a dramatic challenge to the sociological field itself is the chapter on climate change. This chapter, which first appeared in the last edition and is fully updated here, tackles what is arguably the most pressing issue facing global society—the threat that climate change poses to the continuation of modern social life. The idea that human society has evolved during the relatively climate-stable period of the Holocene, roughly the 10 000 years leading up to 1750, come to be challenged by the terraforming and climate-altering impact of humans, now recast as the Anthropocene human history since 1750, when industrial emissions of greenhouse gases began. The chapter explores the science of climate change in detail, climate change scepticism and radicalism, the debate about human-induced causes of climate change, and the sociology of technology that informs understandings of the conflict between nature and culture.

A third major standout area that is featured in this book is the extraordinary take-up of social media in Australia and around the world. Australians are the heaviest per capita users of social media in the world today, with 66 per cent of the population logging in daily to Facebook alone. The social media leviathan has really confounded the forecasts of the early 1990s when the internet became fully domesticated, as the importance of using the internet to continue social relationships that people already have offline has proven to be much more important than the anonymous communication of the avatar.

But more important still, is the ability to personalise our relationships with social media, to feel like we have control over them with our privacy settings, our profile pages and the way we can present a self-for-others. In a way, social media sits at the heart of a paradox in modern social life, which is the simultaneous expansion and contraction of everyday life. On the one hand, social media is a networking technology of global scale, the culmination of a truly connected world. On the other hand the basis of our connection can be as small as the smartphone in our pocket or the thumbnail of smart apps depicted on the front cover of this book. But between the incredible reach of this global connectivity to the private rituals of how we use our phone, there is the possibility that the public sphere in between these extremes has begun to disappear, as the street, our institutions and the social forms founded on physical assembly have been overtaken by the electronic assembly.

Aside from the sociological material, the book includes a number of crucial teaching and learning tools in order to make it an easy and productive book to use by both students and lecturers. You will find at the start of each chapter, for example, a chapter outline which is a summary of its contents, and throughout each chapter a set of learning outcomes. Within each chapter there are a number of feature boxes, which highlight or expand an issue discussed, or offer a case study. In addition, you will find highlighted key terms defined and their use discussed in the margin notes and consolidated in the glossary at the end of the book.

At the conclusion of each chapter there are a number of features which will assist students to develop their learning further. There are a series of critical thinking

questions, which challenge readers to interrogate some of the issues raised in the chapter. On the Pearson website there is a list of texts which are recommended as further reading, or as reference books. Here you will also find an annotated list of websites and other multimedia that can assist with everything from statistical data to discussion groups to non-government organisations interested in the material discussed in the chapter. Also available on the website is Chapter 17, which provides research tools for undertaking field research projects. It includes a discussion of statistical software packages, the ethics of research and a step-by-step guide to the selection of topics, methods and the writing-up phases of research.

In conclusion, we hope that you enjoy *Australian Sociology* and that it enables you to understand more clearly both the society we live in and the ways in which it is likely to develop in the future. Most important of all, we hope it helps you to do this critically.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

research and teaching. Thanks also to Dr Jackie Hallam who provided timely research assistance in chasing the latest relevant studies and journal articles for this edition. Most importantly I thank my partner, Michael Best, and our two wonderful children, Zoe and Jacob, for their constant support and their unquestioning acceptance of my long working hours. I would like to dedicate this edition to my mother, Dorothy Julian, whose capacity to overcome life-threatening events and rise above the daily difficulties of coping with her physical health problems is amazing. She is an inspiration to all of us.

The publisher would like to thank the following reviewers:

David Hodgson
Edith Cowan University

Dr Meredith Nash
University of Tasmania

Dr Phillip Ablett
University of Sunshine Coast

Dr Gisela van Kessel
University of South Australia

Dr Lou Wilson
University of South Australia

WHAT IS SOCIOLOGY?

CHAPTER OUTLINE

■ This chapter introduces the central themes and problems that define sociology.

■ A preliminary sketch of the concept of 'society' is given in order to indicate the range of areas that sociology is capable of addressing.

■ It considers what sociology studies and outlines the primary social 'objects' of the discipline, which at their broadest include capitalism, modernity and patriarchy.

■ Forms of sociological imagination are described to demonstrate how sociology conducts its investigation. The historical, anthropological and critical dimensions of the sociological imagination are detailed.

■ The chapter also highlights the political nature of sociological knowledge. It explains how sociology relates to the practical world and to our policies on social issues and society as a whole.

■ Lastly, the importance of comparing the different perspectives offered by sociology is stressed. By comparing available perspectives, students of sociology are able to decide for themselves how to approach both large and small problems in social life.

learning outcomes

By the end of this chapter you will be able to:

LO1 Describe the field of investigation that sociology studies

LO2 Explain how sociology's concern with inequality and power is linked to social reproduction and social change

LO3 Describe the origins of the sociological imagination and the different forms it has taken

LO4 Explain how the methods employed by the sociological imagination have political implications

> It is when the social world loses its character as a natural phenomenon that the question of the natural or conventional character of social facts can be raised.

(Bourdieu 1987: 169)

When do we feel most at home? When do *you* feel most at home? The answers to these questions invariably depend on your social position and your *identity* in **society**.

What is it about our environment that helps us feel secure? Sociology, the study of society, is a hybrid term that combines the Greek word *socius*, 'companionship', with the Latin *ology*, 'the study of'. But companionship is only the smallest unit of a social relationship. As we shall see in this book, social relationships can be very complex, with many kinds of barriers and divisions within social life that prohibit or discourage certain kinds of relationships. The layers of meaning we give to these relationships also derive from our sense of belonging to them. Therefore, we may feel 'at home' in a range of contexts—in an intimate relationship, with our family, with our neighbourhood, our suburb, our city, our nation; indeed, some may feel equally at home anywhere in the world. However, the latter sense of home, which globalisation has made possible, is not nearly so common as our tendency to identify more locally or nationally. For example, when we say we 'live in a society' this usually refers to the commonsense notion of living within the boundaries of a national territory. Within such a sense of 'society', additional contexts of belonging are possible—our workplace, the local shopping centre, the university, our household. Wherever we find attachment and belonging, we are never removed from the principle of association represented by the concept of 'society'.

Throughout this book, we view the concept of society from ever more general perspectives of organised knowledge. In the process, new and unique understandings of social realities, both large and small, will come into view. The variety of perspectives that provide these new visibilities make up the discipline of sociology.

Sociology, as Berger (1976) observes, trains us for 'seeing the general in the particular'. It provides a body of organised knowledge for understanding social collectivities and the place of social activities within them. Of course, within sociology there are, in turn, numerous perspectives for arriving at an interpretive understanding of social reality, but what is common to each of these perspectives is that they somehow allow us to 'see through' the everyday layers of meaning by which we most commonly understand our world, and enable us to explain things that seemed inexplicable previously.

Part of the reason for this is that sociology not only gives everyday life new meanings: it posits the existence of new kinds of social 'furniture' that might previously have been invisible to us but which, once visible, may seem indispensable to a better understanding of the social world.

Consider the example of class, a social reality explored in depth in Chapter 2. Most of us have an understanding of belonging to a class—as a group or as a rank in a hierarchy. We might even project assumptions about hierarchy on to other everyday realities. When our favourite sportsperson does well, we might describe him or her as

a 'classy' performer. Consciousness of class pervades much of our lives, our ambitions, our sense of power and opportunity. But where do classes come from? Have there always been classes? Are classes just social rankings that we are born into, or are they forces of change? Investigating class further opens up new, unfamiliar layers of understanding the social world that often question our familiar, 'commonsense' outlook.

Gender is yet another example. Many of us think of gender as 'natural'; that gender is somehow a correlate of 'sex', of being male or female (see Chapter 4). Men are attributed with a set of 'masculine' qualities and women 'feminine'. Until quite recently, sex and gender have been seen as inextricable. This situation began to change in Australia and in many capitalist nations over the past 50 years, when the match between gender—socially prescribed attributes—and 'sexed' individuals began to decouple. Sex and gender have undergone a limited separation; some are anxious about this, and others applaud it. Of course, advertisements on television and toys at the supermarket continue to suggest stereotypes for men and women, boys and girls. But in other areas of culture, especially in the workplace and the home, gender roles have shifted, and the previous correspondence between gender and sex has been blurred. Women are moving into traditional 'male' jobs and men are conversely undertaking many domestic tasks that society once ascribed to women. But how far has this separation gone? Does gender remain central to self-identity? Do individuals feel a need to be identified as 'gendered' because it gives them easy access to a secure role? And is such a role as 'easy' and secure for women and/or for men? What forces maintain this distribution of identity known as gender?

Both of these phenomena, class and gender, are on the one hand very familiar to us, but they are also more than the social furniture of everyday life, as we shall see. For example, most sociologists view 'class' as a global phenomenon. However, many of us think of class in terms of status only, and compare ourselves to others in our own street, or city or nation, through the category of class. Although we rarely compare ourselves to people in other nations in class terms, most of the quality of life that is enjoyed in a first-world nation such as Australia can be shown to derive from a *globally* divided class system.

Sociology provides us with theories, perspectives and a massive assembly of social facts through which to understand the most universal realities such as globalisation, down to the seemingly most personal realities, such as the act of suicide. In doing so, sociology shares with philosophy two major concerns—*ontology* and *epistemology*. **Ontology** is the study of 'what exists', whereas **epistemology** is the study of 'how we know what exists'. In Chapter 16, we shall see how the epistemology we use, how we view and research the world, may alter our understanding of what exists. At the same time, an appreciation that the world is changing, and therefore that 'ontology' is changing regardless of the theories we have about it, is an equally important factor in arriving at social explanations.

The relationship between what exists and the certainty of our theories about social reality has been cause for many hundreds of volumes in sociology, so much

ontology
The study of 'what exists'. In sociology, many entities have been advanced as being the most important 'ontologies' for developing a general theory of society, including individuals, classes, groups, discourses and institutions.

epistemology
The study of 'how we know' what we are studying. This area of sociology is concerned with the 'methodology' of the social sciences. Is sociology a 'science' in the same way as the natural sciences are? How does sociology overcome the problem that the researcher is part of the social world he or she is examining? Can sociology be value-free or theory-neutral?

so that the 'sociology of knowledge' has become a branch of sociology in its own right. This vexed and problematic relationship between theories and facts, description and explanation, is common to all areas of knowledge. For sociology, however, the relationship is unique. It differs from other areas of knowledge in one very important respect: it is about humans studying themselves. Sociologists are part of the very object of study that they examine. For this reason, studying sociology potentially entails what is called an 'epistemological circle': in other words, it is impossible for a researcher of human affairs to be value-free, because his or her personal values will distort or obscure the reality being investigated. Methodologically, therefore, sociology has sought to overcome this dilemma of how a researcher can strive for objectivity, or indeed whether such an aim is achievable at all, a matter to which we shall return.

LO1 Describe the field of investigation that sociology studies

■ WHAT DOES SOCIOLOGY STUDY?

At its most ambitious, sociology attempts to understand human societies from a wholistic point of view—what they are composed of, how they are reproduced over time and how they might differ from other societies. From the point of view of this more general understanding, sociology also looks at the way societies are *divided* according to a range of types of individuality and group identities.

inequality
The uneven distribution of wealth and power in society. Such distribution is patterned according to the division of definite groups and classifications, including class, gender, ethnicity and race.

Fundamentally, this means examining the nature of **inequality** in society, the patterned ways in which groups and individuals are not only differentiated but are accorded different positions in the social hierarchy. Of course, as an academic exercise it is possible to differentiate societies in all kinds of arbitrary ways. We can distinguish between those who walk to work and those who drive, between those who wear denim and those who do not, between those who listen to radio and those who prefer to read newspapers. What is important for sociologists is not classification as an end in itself, but *particular* divisions that influence people's access to social **power** and social identity.

power
The study of power has become a centrepiece of modern sociology. In some perspectives it replaces concern with the study of inequality. The main debate about power is that between 'agency' and 'structure'—how much agency individuals have, as opposed to the constraints imposed by larger social forces that they must endure.

The most important markers in this regard are class, gender, race, ethnicity, age and sexuality. Whereas the other ways of differentiating persons and groups strike us as arbitrary, sociologists have been concerned to show how the patterning of power and inequality in society at large is conditioned by *systemic* or structural realities related to these particular markers. To the extent that some inequalities can be shown to be *systemic*, sociology is able to reveal how such inequalities are reproduced over time, as well as the degree to which they exist beyond the control of individuals.

LO2 Explain how sociology's concern with inequality and power is linked to social reproduction and social change

Inequalities in class, for example, have been tied to the historical reproduction of feudal and capitalist societies as *systemic* social formations. Inequalities in gender—the way in which society assigns certain properties and rights to men and others to women—have been linked to patriarchy, as the structural condition that maintains this form of inequality. The uneven but persistent inequalities of race and ethnicity are related to the legacy of colonial domination of much of the world by predominantly

European civilisation, and the establishment of empires of control. As discussed in Chapter 5, the need for migration—itself a legacy of colonialism—is interwoven with the systemic nature of 'globalisation'.

As we shall see, while 'system' theory gives us a broad canvas on which to contextualise so much of social life, often it can only partially explain individuals' different experiences of these 'systems'. The gap between the macro and the micro is often quite wide. To begin with, none of these systems occurs in isolation; rather, they are overlaid and intersect to produce different social 'shapes'. Second, the effect of these systems on individuals may be uneven. While most people will accept the class position they find themselves in, or adopt roles that conform to gender stereotypes, there are also many exceptions. For example, some people refuse stereotypes, try to move out of their class or, if they cannot do that, perhaps seek to challenge the class system or join a social movement (such as the feminist movement).

This means that sociology cannot claim that all social phenomena are derived from some system or other, but must also examine the more specific situations that form persons and groups in the first place. Sociology looks at how a diversity of experience goes into making up a society at large, not *only* at how social structures determine the forms of experience and individuality that occur within it.

There is another crucial factor we have not yet mentioned—that of social change. We can theorise the large picture, the individual picture and their interrelationship, but we must also strive to understand how these realities change over time.

We live in an era in which it has become more challenging than ever to explain the world. It is an era of unparalleled technical achievement, an incredibly vast and complex global division of labour, and electronic assemblies on an unprecedented scale. As discussed in Chapter 14, online social networking now connects over two billion people, and mobile phones have outnumbered landlines as the preferred mode of person-to-person connectivity.

The mobile phone has both shrunk and enlarged our world, from the very personal settings in all of our smart apps and social media platforms, to allowing us to reach out to a global stage of connection and 'virtual travel'.

Through such media, our sense of connection is transforming our social setting at a rate that is difficult to map. But at the same time, surrounding ourselves with technological environments has led to a denaturing of the life-world. Cities have become hothouses for this disconnection from nature as, in 2007, for the first time, more of the world's population had become residents of megacities than rural areas.

What is perhaps the greatest challenge to arise from such change is few individuals are aware of the way we are changing the earth's climate at a rate 10 000 times natural rates. While we live as creatures of technological micro-worlds and urban convenience, the earth is hurtling towards dangerous climate change (see Chapter 15) that may prove to be the ultimate limit to economic growth, to technological progress and to human habitation of the planet itself.

■ HOW DOES SOCIOLOGY STUDY? THE SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION

Sociology has come a long way from the ideas of the 19th-century thinker Auguste Comte. Comte founded the discipline as a science that would allow us to control historical and social reality. His famous maxim *Prevoir pour pouvoir*, 'To be able to predict is to be able to control', is the kind of view of knowledge that in many ways is the antithesis of the sociological imagination as we know it today. Most importantly, this is because sociologists today reject Comte's habit of treating human beings as though they were objects in the natural world (a view known as *positivism*). (For a review, see Keat & Urry 1975.)

Sociology does not proceed with the analytical tools of the natural sciences but has its own unique methodological approaches—what C. Wright Mills has called 'the **sociological imagination**' (Mills 1983). The sociological imagination confronts the fact that human societies and the individuals within them are transient, changing and situational. The objects of study in sociology are not fixed, and their appearance depends on the perspective of the observer. The latter feature of sociological inquiry relates to the fact that sociologists are necessarily a part of the object that they study. They necessarily interweave the significance of their own place within society with their study of society in general. This is why, for Mills, a persistent reflexivity is needed by sociologists in order to put into perspective the way they themselves have been shaped by their society. To do this, sociologists must understand 'what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society' (Mills 1983: 14). This reflexivity requires the researcher to minimise his or her own subjective 'biases', but it also provides an appreciation of history and society at their most abstract. The sociological imagination 'is the capacity to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between these two' (Mills 1983: 14).

Since Mills wrote his book, these local contexts of social life have been described as the 'life-world' and the study of them as the 'sociology of everyday life'. Alternatively, the world of structural issues is often paired up with 'systems theory' or, more ambitiously, 'grand theory'. However, Mills' persistent point is that to consider one without the other amounts to a feeble avoidance of the sociological imagination.

As previously mentioned, the sociological imagination is distinguished from other modes of inquiry because it studies individuals and the organisation of human experience, and not objects in the natural world. All manner of implications arise from this, some of which we will cover throughout this book, including the dilemma of whether or not it is appropriate to study human action independently of the meanings that are attached to it.

This brings us to a second feature of sociological inquiry: the fact that it is interpretive—or 'hermeneutic'—and not instrumental. It does not study meaning and action in order to regulate or control it. That is, sociological inquiry is not constrained by instrumental goals. The idea of instrumental knowledge or rationality comes from another key figure in sociological thought, Max Weber. He was the first to emphasise the distinction

sociological imagination
A kind of interpretive imagination that does not treat its subject matter like objects in the natural world. The sociological imagination is anthropological, historical and critical.

between instrumental and interpretive reason. Instrumental reason is anti-philosophical in that it is preoccupied with achieving an objective according to an extremely tightly defined set of criteria. When provided with a 'given', instrumental rationality will find the best technical means of coming up with a solution. But do not ask instrumental rationality to interpret anything. The sociological imagination, on the other hand, is not guided by an end to knowledge. It addresses a world without constraint.

To say that the sociological imagination is interpretive is also to point out how it tries to investigate beyond the outward appearance of social life. In doing so, most sociology is wary of taking events and discourses at 'face value'. Indeed, some sociologists have aptly been described as 'hermeneuts of suspicion' who study the inner systems within society.

From here the theses and questions about society begin rapidly to multiply. Where does one society end and another begin? Where are the boundaries of these societies? Are there any boundaries at all? In dividing societies into depth and surface, essence and appearance, are we describing the actual form of society ('ontology'—that societies just are that way), or is this an epistemological move designed to allow us to think we better understand the social world? On the other hand, what if there are inner laws of social organisation determining everything we do, our life chances, how others think of us and so on? Is it not then important to question what these laws are?

And what is the status of 'essence' and appearance? Does the familiar 'appearance of things' hide the less familiar essence—the inner logics and laws of society? Alternatively, does the essence of that society (for example, 'rationality', economics, discourse) 'produce' the appearance? And finally, aren't appearances convincing? (Indeed, advertisers claim that appearances are *everything*.) And, if they are convincing, are they not as real as, or more real than, the presumed inner laws that lie at the base of social organisation?

The idea that central organising ontologies are responsible for the diversity of experience we encounter and live is difficult to prove. To investigate such structures, sociology has recourse to a number of kinds of research. In the early 1980s, the British sociologist Anthony Giddens proposed three kinds of sociological imagination that enrich our understanding of social structure—historical, cultural and critical (Giddens 1988).

Kinds of sociological imagination

As we have seen, modern sociology seldom engages in social forecasting. Karl Marx, another key figure in the founding of sociology, provides a model case of this. For example, despite the thousands of pages commentators have devoted to Marx's remarks prophesying the coming of a 'communist' society, the truth remains that of the 61 volumes he authored (or co-authored with Engels), only 15 pages are devoted to the possibility of a future communist state. Most of these pages were in political pamphlets, written as journalism rather than social analysis. Marx's *Capital*, for example, merely analyses hundreds of years of European human history. However,

while predicting social futures may be neither possible nor desirable, it is nevertheless possible and desirable to seek to understand the present.

The object of most sociological analysis is present-day society, the understanding of what is going on around us. In assuming such a focus, sociology does, however, share some commonalities with history and anthropology. The simplest way to understand the society in which we live is to contrast it either in time or in kind. History can teach us how what we take for granted today has not always been the case, whereas anthropology can show us societies different from our own as a way of demonstrating the contingency and idiosyncrasy of all societies.

For the sociological imagination to be reflexive, it is not enough to examine our own society; we must try to look at other societies from radically different times and places. It is only through defining what our own society is not that we can truly begin to describe its character.

A good example of this we can take from Michel Foucault, one of the thinkers we will be studying in this book. His methodological approach of a 'history of the present' serves as an excellent illustration (and has been taken up by historians, sociologists and cultural analysts alike). Foucault proposed that the purpose of history is to study the past not as an end in itself, but as a way of reflecting on the present. That is to say, traditional history imagines it is speaking about the past, but for Foucault, and in the majority of cases, it is really superimposing the 'discourses' (ways of thinking and speaking) of the present on the past. Foucault aims to reverse this logic. He says in his book on disciplinary power, *Discipline and Punish* (1979: 26): 'I would like to write a history of [the] prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing the history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present.'

Foucault captures, in a trice, the import of the historical domain of the sociological imagination. His studies proceed by showing how strange and different past societies and cultural formations have been, and in doing so disturb all that is comfortable in categories by which we 'live' present-day social conditions. This is not to propose that historical reality can be known 'exactly as it was'; it is to avoid merely reinstating the orthodoxies of contemporary thinking by applying them to other times and places.

Historical analysis is an indispensable aid in the task of explaining the present conditions of contemporary society. Indeed, it was a method used by the founders of sociology in the 19th century, whose strengths lie in contrasting traditional and modern society.

In the 20th century the discipline of anthropology emerged as a way of exploring the contrasts between different cultures. Anthropology is a discipline that is often partnered with sociology in a university department, and it provides most of the methodological basis for what is called 'comparative sociology'. Comparative sociology allows us to understand 'other' cultures in organised ways. Other places, other ethnicities, other nations and other identities become conduits through which we can

understand 'ourselves'. Of course, here a great number of challenges and tensions are introduced. Understanding difference can result in a worldly appreciation of culture, but it can also be cause for insecurity in our identity. In a globalising world such a confrontation may grow more acute, leading to xenophobic forms of nationalism which appeal to an ethnocentric, one-dimensional world of homogeneous identity. At the same time, the concern that some members of society may have about 'others' and otherness can dissipate as tourism, migration, commodity exchange and global media conspire in the creation of what has been called a 'global fugue state' (Ostwald 2001). In such a period the behaviour of an ever-increasing proportion of the world's population becomes in a sense 'touristic', without even the need for travel. The global in-mixing of culture may become generalised to the point where it becomes more difficult to find an Other at all, as all culture is engaged by a law of the Same.

In the current period of cultural globalisation, therefore, the concept of **culture** is a fraught one. As analysed in Chapter 13, the commonsense notion of culture as tied exclusively to ethnicity is problematised. As capitalism spreads over the globe it tends to destroy most senses of ethnic culture in its wake, and to replace these with the culture of capitalism itself. Industrialisation, informationalisation, consumerism and McDonaldisation are each 'cultures' of their own kind. They uproot so many of the traditions necessary for many ethnic cultures to survive.

culture
The learned ideas, values, knowledge, rules and customs shared by members of a collectivity (such as those based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, indigeneity, age, disability).

Capitalism first emerged in Europe and expanded in the waves of imperialism that came out of Europe over hundreds of years. It is only in the 20th century that one of the former colonies of Europe, the United States itself, assumed the centre of imperialist power. The dominance of the US economy and political apparatus, as well as its military and media imperialism in world affairs, has had a dramatic impact on every region of the world. As discussed in Chapter 14, American serial dramas and soap operas are played throughout Europe, Asia and the third world. At the same time, approximately 75 per cent of World Wide Web traffic is sourced in the United States. The influence of such concentrations of media dominance can be seen in the rapid evaporation of the world's languages. There are currently 6000 languages in the world, which are disappearing at the rate of over 100 per year. It is estimated that by 2040 only 600 languages will remain, the most dominant of which will be English.

These trends in cultural globalisation compel us to reconsider the distinctiveness of Australian culture, itself a legacy of European imperialism but at the same time such a relatively young colony that its white population has barely developed an identity significant enough to justify feeling threatened by globalisation. If there are any Australians who have been displaced, dislocated and uprooted from their traditional identity, it is Australia's Indigenous peoples (see Chapter 3). The confrontation between black and white Australians, between a culture 40 000 years old and a colony of Europeans and Asians who came to a New World, is much more profound than that between 21st-century Australia and the rest of the globe.

The contrast between the colonised and colonisers is so wide as to make reconciliation a seemingly unachievable task. For black and white to understand each other

requires an appreciation of cultural relativity—an attempt to understand the 'other' culture from the point of view of its own norms and values. Of course, such an exercise is necessarily limited by the fact that 'we' (a 'we' that might be black or white) can never quite 'live' what it means to belong to another culture; but at least we can be sensitive to our differences and avoid imposing judgements that have no place in the social world of others.

Perhaps the greatest insight that is arrived at in comparing one's culture with that of another is a realisation that social reality is not given, but is constructed in fragile contingent and inessential ways. To recognise that other cultures might organise and differentiate their societies in radically different ways is to perceive equally how the content and structure of one's own culture is arbitrary. It could be organised in an infinite number of other ways. Usually, however, this sense of culture derives from intersocietal comparison. Also we need to mention how cultural difference operates within the same society.

In almost every society it is possible to discern dominant cultures and minority cultures or 'subcultures'. The dominant culture is usually identifiable by a dominant

ideology

A set of socially determined beliefs, values and opinions that Marxists have suggested function towards maintaining and 'naturalising' the 'status quo'. Together with education, legal and political apparatuses, the media is one of the most central institutions with a role in the circulation of 'dominant' ideologies. In relation to media, John B. Thompson (1990: 6) has usefully defined ideology as 'meaning in the service of power'.

ideology through which definitions of social reality are produced and *naturalised*. On the other hand, by their mere existence, minority cultures often present a challenge to the right of the dominant culture to dominate.

Studying minority cultures and subcultures is an extremely revealing exercise for sociologists to undertake, because in the process the nature of the dominant culture becomes ever more visible. This is particularly true in times of social conflict, when a dominant order is threatened. Never is a structure more visible than when it is under threat—whether we are speaking of a political, economic or social structure. New trends in art, music and street culture implicitly comment on 'mainstream' culture and its orthodoxy. Likewise, protests, strikes and demonstrations nearly always point out injustices that reverse the way in which dominant ideologies naturalise inequality.

At the same time, as discussed in Chapter 9, mainstream culture often tries to label different groups as deviant in order to reaffirm its power. The important point in both these processes of differentiation, by minority or majority groups, is that the sociological imagination cannot be content to make intersocietal or historical comparisons only. The actions and attitudes of individuals are shaped also by interaction within and between groups in the same society. For this reason, it is necessary to understand the internal structure and composition of our own society.

The turn inward to our own social formation gives us the critical dimension of the sociological imagination. In conducting critical analysis, sociologists must constantly question their own assumptions and justify the relationship they establish between evidence and conclusion. Here the question of the value of freedom comes up again. When sociologists attempt to get at the 'facts', to what extent do their own value judgements determine which 'facts' are selected and which are ignored? And what is a fact in the first place? Do facts simply wait to be uncovered prior to our investigation of them? What is the relationship between theories and facts?

Recent work in the methodology of the social sciences has questioned the idea that facts exist independently of theories, that there can be a theory-neutral experience of the world. This view relies on a separation of 'theories', as the invention of thinking, and facts, which are deemed to exist objectively. This latter view is a commonsense one most of us hold, and is known as *empiricism*. Empiricism is a theoretical approach and should be distinguished from 'empirical', which refers to the practice of researching the world of social objects, common to all species of sociology. Empiricism often entails a correspondence theory of truth, the idea that an investigation aims to mirror the 'real' world with accurate description.

Paradoxically, empiricism is so prevalent in Western societies that it is rarely even thought of as a theory. For this reason, 'collecting facts' seems to be a quite innocent pre-theoretical exercise. However, critics of empiricism point out that the selection and conceptualisation of facts is made possible only by a pre-theoretical understanding that makes certain facts significant in the first place. Moreover, it is the theory—an abstract way of differentiating the social world into elements and the relations deemed to exist between these elements—that makes facts visible *as* facts.

This criticism of empiricism as the dominant 'Western metaphysic' has enormous implications for studying social relationships. To the extent that such a criticism holds sway, it is not valid for sociologists to propose that they have an 'objective' method. This is because, before any investigation begins, all sociologists employ some kind of theoretical framework, explicitly or implicitly, whether or not they are aware of it. Even if they reject the idea of using a theoretical perspective, they are *ipso facto* subscribing to an empiricist approach.

This is not to say that there is no point in doing research any more because it will always be 'biased' by a theory. Rather, it is important that the coherence of the theory and the object it investigates be checked *continuously*. Theories may rapidly become irrelevant as the field of investigation changes. Alternatively, what used to be regarded as immutable 'facts' may be replaced, or disappear, as the theory itself becomes refined.

This does not mean that we ought to switch our theories continuously. Usually they need to be modified, but a theory may hold up over a very long period of time. For example, insofar as it can be demonstrated that Australia is a capitalist society, it is entirely appropriate to engage theories of capitalism (Marx and Weber) that maintain a relevance long after their authors have died. If, however, Australia ceased to be characterised by the central features of capitalism that were theorised over 100 years ago, it would be dogmatic to seek to apply such a theory to that society.

Thus, the *critical* domain of the sociological imagination calls on us to maintain this labour of checking, or checking back and forth, between the theories we are using and the meanings, events, processes and structures in the social world.

The politics of the sociological imagination

To the above three kinds of imagination—the historical, the comparative and the critical—we can add a fourth domain—politics. If it is impossible to be theory-

LO4 Explain how the methods employed by the sociological imagination have political implications

independent in one's observation of the world, it goes without saying that every sociological statement, no matter how modest, also involves a commitment to a certain world-view and serves a definite interest of individuals and groups within its field of view. Consequently, sociology is a key discipline with an influence in practical policy formulation and social reform.

A number of ways to conceptualise this convergence between 'theory' and 'practice' are outlined below.

Convergence between theory and practice

Sociology as an instrumental discipline

Some sociologists, particularly those coming out of the American tradition of 'functionalism', argue that sociology should not be an analysis of society but an analysis *for* society. (For an appraisal, see Fay 1975.) Which is to say that sociology should be used as a tool for repairing society's problems, to assist the state in the better regulation of social functions and guarantee the smooth running of society (see Chapter 16). Of course, what the 'problems' are varies within this tradition. Some argue that social policies should tackle overcoming the deep inequalities that exist in so many nations around the world, while others see these inequalities as immutable and think sociology should focus on making the best of managing them, including their pathologies.

For example, in the United States, in the management of the most deprived members of society, such as the 2.1 million persons incarcerated in prisons, there has lately been a turn away from interpretive sociology to *criminology* as the most important focus of sociology. At the same time the sociology of work, the family, health and deviance are each at the forefront of the instrumental approach to 'managing' society. Every year these disciplines are studied by over one million Americans at university. Developed by the sociology of family tradition in the United States, some of the terminology has even passed into everyday use, such as 'dysfunctional' ('the dysfunctional family'), a direct offspring of functionalist sociology. In Australia, the instrumental approach to sociology has been historically more progressive, and has aimed at mending social ills and inequalities. In the late 1990s, however, government departments in Australia became selective about using particular sociological policy formulations, in policies such as 'work for the dole' and 'mutual obligation'. Approaches such as 'action research', a composite of networking, researching and educating organisations, have been used and continue to be used by government departments to improve their quality and performance. However, this latter kind of research, credentialled as 'sensitive social science' in the United States and used widely within the Australian state, attends to the internal dynamics of an organisational culture, not to how that organisation relates to society in general or to wider inequalities and changes.

Sociology as permanent critique

Partly as a reaction to the excessive instrumentalisation of sociology during the 20th century, a recent addition to sociological critique is postmodern sociology. It seeks to

preserve a sense of the 'critique of society' and has been very critical of any attempts to appropriate sociology as a handbook for 'engineering' society. Postmodern sociology, which has been influenced most profoundly by 20th-century continental intellectual traditions (especially the French traditions, which have been imported as 'postmodern' in the United States and elsewhere, although French sociologists often reject the term being applied to them: see Chapter 16), has expressed immense indignity and contempt for any form of knowledge that proposes to 'speak for others' (Foucault & Deleuze 1977: 209).

Such contempt is understandable in the context of French society, which is particularly afflicted by technocratic procedures. But in nearly all Western societies, sociologists have tried to grapple with instrumental and 'governmental' forms of disciplinary power. For many postmodernists the critique has extended to education (J.F. Lyotard), the media (J. Baudrillard), the family (J. Donzelot), and psychology and sociology itself as 'normalising' disciplines (M. Foucault). For Foucault, the human sciences and European 'humanism'—a particular style of subjectivity in which individuals police their own behaviour—have colluded in the normalisation, surveillance and discipline of populations in Western societies for over a century.

Against such a movement, Foucault advances what he has called an 'ethos of permanent critique' (Foucault 1984: 42). Foucault's method is never aimed at yielding fixed truths but 'demands relentless erudition' (Foucault 1977: 140). Foucault views this ethos as a valuable legacy of the Enlightenment (which is in tension with other elements that propose triumphal kinds of knowledge). Foucault argues that any critique of present-day societies is necessarily limited: 'The critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them' (1984: 50). We must constantly question historical limits in order to separate 'what is given to us as universal, necessary, obligatory' in a particular period from 'what place is occupied by whatever is singular, contingent and the product of arbitrary constraints' (Foucault 1984: 50). It is then possible to assess 'what limits knowledge has to renounce transgressing', not in order to develop an instrumental theory as a tool of control but to resist that which confronts us as obligatory. There is no point in resisting what is arbitrary, but it may easily be confused with the universal unless we permanently question our historical situation.

Sociology and social reproduction

All sociologists have affinities with postmodern sociological views about the role of criticism, to some degree. Many sociologists see their role as providing critique and reflection. Given how few areas of capitalist culture provide for such an activity, it is important that sociology and its collegial disciplines in the social sciences maintain the practice of criticism. At the same time, some sociologists view 'postmodern' sociology as an overreaction to the contemporary state and organisational bureaucracies. Complex societies are capable of all kinds of crises and obviously need to be administered and governed in order to avoid social disorder. Postmodern sociologists have

been accused of equating a particular characteristic of modernity—state control—with society in general. In this they develop post-social accounts of the world that refuse to be reduced to any kind of program that might lend itself to large-scale social reform. Often this is expressed as theoretical individualism—what has been described as 'an ethic of constant disengagement from constituted forms of experience' (Rajchman 1985: 37). It is well to have 'indignity for speaking for others' in the face of bureaucratic intellectuals prescribing for others their social needs, but the question of whether it is only bureaucrats and their peculiar kind of rationalism who are doing this 'speaking' remains.

Then there is the question of structure, and of the fact that structures may also prescribe for us our identity, our opportunities and our value systems. How do we know what these structures are unless we inquire into them? And if we do not know what they are, how do we know what needs to be changed and how these changes can be achieved? These questions are all endemic to what has become known in sociology as the structure versus agency debate, where 'structure' refers to the social determinations that antedate the individual and 'agency' denotes the power individuals have in structured contexts.

More important even than structure, however, is how such structures are *reproduced* over time. How is it that the positions that individuals occupy in a structure might change, yet the structure itself retains the same form from day to day, year to year, decade to decade? One argument that emerges here is that to understand how a structure is reproduced (for example, a class structure or patriarchal structure) is to understand its innermost workings.

This has led some sociologists, such as Pierre Bourdieu (1930–2002), to focus on *practice* as a starting point for understanding social life (see Bourdieu 1987: 1–30). Bourdieu argues that sociologists cannot understand structures merely theoretically. Rather, in understanding the social practices that both reproduce and threaten social structures we can begin to unravel them. To go back to our discussion of ontology, it is not enough to understand 'what exists' in isolation; we have to understand *what is possible* as a path to what exists. Any theory that provides this account is, *ipso facto*, an adequate theory of the reproduction of these practices and, more importantly, of their *non-reproduction*. When it is known by experience which practices threaten prevailing social structures to the point where they would cease to be structures, then those structures become more tangible. The theory that results is valid to an extent: if it guides our actions towards **social change**, it succeeds in practically transforming the social reality it addresses.

The focus of social and cultural reproduction that characterises Bourdieu's perspective is an attempt to overcome the distinction between subjective and objective kinds of knowledge. Both are important forms of knowledge in unravelling the problem of social reproduction. Theories need to be generated from empirical research, but they also need to be tested in practice for us to be reassured of their validity. The direction of that practice becomes a key question here. Whether this practice should

social change
The process of historical transformation of societies. Such change may range from 'incremental' and gradual to revolutionary and abrupt. The most important areas of change relating to Australia that have been named by recent sociologists are from industrial to 'post-industrial' society, from modern to postmodern, and from 'middle' to 'late' capitalism.

be oriented towards organisation reform, policy formulation, social reform, political protest or an entire social revolution is a matter for social actors to determine.

The importance of comparing perspectives

Questions about the society in which we live—its future, our roles and responsibilities in it, the way it functions and changes—are questions that we confront in our public and inner lives. As the world becomes integrated through the expanding communication revolution, we live in an increasingly multicultural and multidimensional environment. Understanding this complexification of the life-world has become an urgent task. Sociology gives us powerful perspectives through which to view the present and to examine critically so-called commonsense explanations of social interaction and social structures.

Whether we are concerned with social change (no matter how modest) or merely understanding the society we live in, sociology offers a vast range of perspectives by which to achieve these aims. Just as we can compare different societies to gain knowledge of our own, it is important that we learn to compare the different perspectives available to sociology, as a way of establishing the coherence of our analysis of the field we are investigating.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this book you will be introduced to a range of sociological perspectives, and encounter systems of thought ranging from the 19th-century 'founders' of the discipline to recent contemporary theoretical movements, such as post-structuralism, postmodernity and deconstruction. To 'know thy perspectives' and be able to ground any given text in one or more of the perspectives that sociology employs is the most valuable aid in steering your way through this very broad discipline. For example, to be able to link a particular thinker to one or more perspectives helps clarify why that thinker presents his or her field of inquiry in a certain way. It also enables the scholar to make informed judgements of whether the approach employed is appropriate or instructive. Matching up a field of inquiry with a sociological perspective that can engage with it is a difficult task, and in doing so as researchers we invariably modify our own theoretical positions and premises.

CRITICAL THINKING QUESTIONS

1. What is the link between ontology and epistemology in defining the field of sociology? (LO1)
2. Is 'inequality' necessary? How is it linked to social reproduction and social change? (LO2)
3. Which of the different kinds of sociological imagination are useful in the 21st century? (LO3)
4. What are the main topics of social change that have altered the nature of sociological inquiry? (LO4)