What Is Liberation Sociology?

Introduction: Critical Approaches to Society

In the spring of 1845 one of the founders of the liberation sociology tradition, the young Karl Marx, wrote that “the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”¹ Sociologists centrally concerned about human emancipation and liberation take this insight seriously. The point of liberation sociology is not just to research the social world but to change it in the direction of democracy and social justice.

Liberation sociology is concerned with alleviating or eliminating various social oppressions and with creating societies that are more just and egalitarian societies. Liberation from what is linked to liberation for what. An emancipatory sociology not only seeks sound scientific knowledge but also takes sides with, and takes the outlook of, the oppressed and envisions an end to that oppression. It adopts what Gideon Sjoberg and his associates have called a countersystem approach. A countersystem analyst consciously tries to step outside her or his own society in order to better view it. A countersystem perspective often envisions a society where people have empathetic compassion for human suffering and a commitment to reducing that suffering. It envisions research and analysis relevant to everyday human problems, particularly those of the oppressed. The countersystem standard is broader than that of an existing society or nation state. Using a broader human rights standard, such as the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the liberation sociologist assesses existing social institutions against a vision of more humane social arrangements.²
The consequences of taking this standpoint are explored throughout this book. We are unabashedly eclectic in our approach and are influenced by Enlightenment, modernist, and postmodernist theorists. Neo-Marxist, feminist, and antiracist conceptions have had their impact on our thinking. Moreover, the liberation theology of Latin America and Africa and recent developments in the way we think about the mind and the body—no longer a viable dichotomy—have also been influential (see Chapter 2).

We do not propose here another abstract or doctrinaire approach but rather an emancipatory way to practice good sociology. Taking sides with, and the outlook of, the oppressed can have profound consequences for the stages of social research: on how we know what we know, on what we choose to research, on the nature of our scientific endeavor, on the methods we choose, and on the conclusions we can draw from research.

A sociologist's, or a social research team's, choice of what to study is a consciously goal-oriented decision. This subjective choice is not made in isolation but according to personal and collective tastes and convictions, and often in response to enticements such as grant monies, career prestige, and job security. Thus, some sociologists choose to deeply research U.S. society with an eye to changing it, whereas others choose to narrowly research certain social variables whose description is sought by leading agents of the status quo. Some social scientists choose to go into the field and examine critically the impact of powerful nation states and of large corporations on people's everyday lives and provide that information to proponents of change, whereas other researchers limit their research to more or less uncritical descriptions of the attitudes of the general population for an establishment funding agency. Some choose to dig deeply into the society's foundations, including its systems of social control and information distribution, whereas others choose to do only surface-level research that helps those who head existing systems perform their roles more successfully. A concern for greatly expanding human rights frequently guides the research of social scientists who seek major social improvements, whereas others choose to ignore the oppressive values and practices of the status quo.

Some research emphasizes its policy relevance for those at the helm of the nation state or large corporations. The research of liberation sociology, in contrast, is generally defined by its usefulness to the those who are oppressed and struggling for their liberation. Commitments to alleviating human suffering—or to peace, social justice, and democracy—politicize the practice of sociology no more than the commitments that assert indifference, value-free methods, or neutral knowledge.

One of the exciting developments since the 1960s has been the emergence of an array of critical social theories in the humanities and social sciences. These include, among others, feminist theory, postmodern theory, queer theory, antiracist theory, and a variety of Marxist theories, including the critical theory of Germany's Frankfurt School. Since the 1960s the social sciences in Europe and the United States have become more accepting of Marxist thought, as well as of the other critical approaches. Numerous sociologists have joined progressive organizations such as the Sociology Liberation Movement. Since the 1960s, critical social theory has been published in new books and in a new sociology journal called the Insurgent Sociologist. As sociologist Beren Berkovitch has noted, "This new generation of critical scholars—envisaging a society without exploitation, oppression, and domination of one class, race, sex, or state by another—helped provide the tools for analysis for the critical study of social issues and social problems that confront contemporary capitalist society."

A common theme in critical social theories is the centrality of social oppression and domination. In their research and analysis, most critical social analysts press for the liberation of human beings from oppressive and alienating social conditions. Most research the larger institutional contexts and macrostructures of oppression, domination, and exploitation and yet also view such structures as crashing into the everyday lives of human beings. The daily experiences of oppressed and subjugated peoples are a central focus and concern.

As a rule, critical social theorists do not focus only on the negative realities and consequences of oppression but often target issues and strategies of human liberation from that oppression (see Chapter 7). These theoretical frameworks see resistance to oppression and domination as beginning "at home, in people's everyday lives—sexuality, family roles, workplace." These critical social thinkers support the action of human beings in their own liberation.
Empowering People

One Effort at Liberation Sociology: Project Censored

Let us briefly examine an example of sociological effort toward societal liberation—a project that has had a significant impact. This research effort is called Project Censored. Carl Jensen, a sociologist at Sonoma State University, launched this national research effort in the 1970s to explore whether there was systematic omission of important and newsworthy events and issues in the mainstream media.

In discussions with us, Jensen has noted that his quest was stimulated in part by bewilderment over the re-election of Richard Nixon by a landslide only five months after the news of the Watergate break-in, one of the more sensational political crimes in U.S. history—in which Nixon’s campaign organization was known to be involved. Jensen’s knowledge of the mainstream press was useful in explaining: “While there was substantial information available tying the administration in with the Watergate burglary, the media did not put the issue on the national agenda until after the presidential election in November 1972.” Therefore, the American people who went to the polls in November were “uninformed about the true significance of Watergate.” In effect, the mass media fostered the re-election of Nixon.

Jensen’s bewilderment is an attitude toward events that has propelled the research of many generations of scientists. Galileo, Isaac Newton, Alfred Einstein, Karl Marx, W.E.B. Du Bois, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and many others also refused to accept what was happening before their eyes as unproblematic, routine, or natural. They asked, “Why?” “How?” and “Under what conditions?” As in other counterculture sociology projects, this attitude was coupled with a desire to change the world, to make a difference. Jensen imagined a world with more democracy, and one with a freer flow of information. He also thought about the way that sociological research could bring it about.

An attitude of curiosity and concern about what happens in the world is not easy to translate into actual research. Many other people may be looking at the same happenings and seeing something ordinary, something not worth research effort. Jensen had come to understand an important issue but quickly learned as well that “no one else seemed to share that knowledge.” He queried nineteen sociology departments at the California universities, seeking advice and counsel, yet received no response. Alfred McClung Lee, a past president of the American Sociological Association, whose work we will examine later, was one of the few who initially encouraged this innovative project.

Interestingly, Jensen’s main support and encouragement came from the lower-middle-class and working-class students who took his annual seminar in media censorship. In 1976 this seminar began to conduct the research he had in mind, and Project Censored was born. For Jensen this project became “a personal crusade” that eventually led him to cut his teaching activities in half in the mid-1980s, with a consequent cut in pay. Sociology departments around the nation seldom have resources or the inclination to finance internal research projects, particularly those with such a progressive intent. Jensen’s wife, Sandra, became a full-time partner in his research enterprise. It was not until 1989 that Jensen got a grant from the CS Fund, one of the few foundations that support innovative boat-rocking research projects. This major breakthrough allowed Jensen to hire a part-time research assistant and permitted the project to better produce and disseminate its research results. Slowly, an international reputation developed, and other grants followed. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, Project Censored continues to have an impact on domestic and global public access to mass media information. After Jensen retired from the project in 1996, Peter Phillips, another sociologist, was brought in to shepherd the operations of Project Censored.

According to Project Censored’s mission statement, its main objective is

the advocacy for and protection of First Amendment free press in the United States. Through a faculty, student, community partnership, Project Censored serves as a national press/media ombudsman by identifying important national news stories that are underreported, ignored, misrepresented, or censored by media corporations anywhere in the United States. We also encourage and support journalists, faculty, and student investigations into First Amendment issues through our annual censorship yearbook and nationwide free press advocacy.
To identify the underreported or ignored news stories, Project Censored relies on twenty or so researchers who are college students participating in the annual Project Censored seminar at Sonoma State University. These students analyze hundreds of nominations received from journalists, educators, librarians, researchers, and the general public. The students carefully examine the nominations and after a discussion decide which stories can be considered censored in the mainstream media. This is a process of classification of and comparison with the stories that made the mainstream media. The seminar offers students an opportunity to learn by participating in field research.

Every year, Project Censored publishes a list of the twenty-five most censored news stories. Final selections are made by a panel of distinguished journalists, educators, and authors, who volunteer their efforts. By ranking ignored or censored news stories and disseminating the details about the stories, Project Censored de-censors them and better informs the public. For example, in 1995 the media ignored a story about sixty-eight elderly men and women who were dumped in a mass grave in Chicago. Most of these were poor elderly people who died alone and unknown during that year’s heat wave. For Jensen, “the traditional hallmark of a responsible press is that it should afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted; it would seem that today’s press has turned that measure on its head.”

Over the years, Project Censored’s Top 25 list has called the attention of the public to the suppression of very important stories. In 1998, for example, the top censored story was “Secret International Trade Agreement Undermines the Sovereignty of Nations.” Few mainstream news organizations reported on the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI), which set in place a large series of protections for foreign investment around the world. This agreement, according to reports in the alternative press, gives corporations rights nearly equal to those of nation states. “This agreement has the potential to place profits ahead of human rights and social justice,” the researchers of Project Censored were able to determine. (In 1999, demonstrators against the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle brought the issue of nation state sovereignty to the forefront of national attention.) This treaty between the United States and twenty-eight other nations safeguards foreign investment by limiting the countries’ legal ability to protect their environments and labor rights. It limits a country’s control over its forests and oil and mineral resources and prohibits bans on toxic dumping. It also restricts or eliminates food subsidies, agrarian reform, environmental health measures, and other social reforms. In effect, such measures give global corporations substantial sovereignty over formerly independent nations.

The news story that was eleventh on the 1998 list was “Private Prison Expansion Becomes Big Business.” This story refers to private corporations that contract with governments to run jails and prisons. These corporations operate as cheaply as possible to maximize profit: “Substandard diets, extreme overcrowding, and abuses by poorly trained personnel have all been documented as practices of this private business.” Since they are often paid per prisoner, such corporations have a financial stake in an administration of prisons that emphasizes incarceration over other goals such as rehabilitation.

Project Censored has publicized statistical figures little known to the public, but which constitute vitally important information for those who vote on political candidates and programs. For example, the United States, contrary to the rhetorical emphasis on equality, has become the most unequal of all industrialized nations—with the wealthiest 1 percent of households holding at least 40 percent of the nation’s wealth. Moreover, there were more poor working families in the late 1990s than in the 1970s. The growing inequality in the nation is a story not centrally covered by mainstream media corporations, which are generally controlled by white male owners or executives in the 1 percent at the top of the nation’s socioeconomic pyramid.

Walter Cronkite, the retired journalist who wrote the introduction for the 1996 Project Censored yearbook, noted that ideological diversity “is the strength of the free press, and since the nation’s founding it has been so perceived by those who love democracy.” Project Censored counters to an extent what Cronkite calls “the awesome power” of mainstream media executives deciding what news is worth exposing. Cronkite explains that the news stories that reach journalists like him “have been culled and re-culled by persons far outside our control.” People at local newspapers or in the news wire services, such as the Associated Press, decide which local items are passed to network news centers in the big cities, where
producers and anchor people then decide what actually goes on the air. Colorful or violent stories tend to get the most attention. As some journalists say, “if it bleeds, it leads.” Often this decision “involves which items can be illustrated—which we freely acknowledge gives the item far greater impact than the paragraph recited by the broadcaster.” The result is that a small elite of professional journalists make the “significant judgments on the news of the day, and it is a lot of power for a few men.”

Those sociologists and others guiding Project Censored make it clear that they are not just concerned with overly zealous governmental officials who intentionally censor news, as when U.S. military officials have severely limited press access to the theaters of war. This is but one type of censorship. There are other forms, including business-oriented actions that are in effect self-censoring. Peter Phillips, director of Project Censored, has explained that “media owners and managers are motivated to please advertisers and upper-middle-class readers. Journalists and editors are not immune from management influence. Journalists want to see their stories approved for print or broadcast, and editors come to know the limits of their freedom to diverge from the bottom-line view of owners and managers.”

In addition to identifying bypassed news stories, Project Censored keeps an eye on developing trends. One trend is the continuing concentration of media ownership. A democracy cannot survive without a free flow of information. The managing editor of the New York Times once confided as much: “Year after year, newspapers have become concentrated into fewer and fewer organizations. Those organizations have become more and more centralized, less and less concerned about the flow of information to the public and more occupied with the flow of profits to the central corporation.”

In the late 1990s, the 155 directors on the boards of eleven of the largest and most influential media corporations were the media elite of the world, yet they would fit in a medium-sized college classroom. Although these directors may not agree on all issues, “they do represent the collective vested interests of a significant proportion of corporate America and share a common commitment to free market capitalism, economic growth, internationally protected copyrights, and a government dedicated to protecting their interests.” With increased concentration, only a narrow corporate-sanctioned version of the major news will likely be presented. Moreover, as this concentration and censorship are placed in the hands of executives at a few multinational corporations, it will also mean global media control and a narrowing of the news available to the majority of people on the planet. The consequences of this information control deserve more sociological study.

The sociologists and others working on Project Censored show us how the sociological imagination can be applied for the common good. Without a strong commitment to participatory democracy and a vision of the importance of an educated citizenry, the research conducted in this project would not have been possible. Carl Jensen and his social science colleagues are engaged in a type of counter-system research and analysis.

Sociology and Social Betterment

The sociology of liberation is part of a long tradition that aims at both studying and rebuilding society. Auguste Comte, the French physicist and philosopher who coined the term sociology in the nineteenth century, viewed the new science as laying bare the reality of society and thereby helping to transform it (see Chapter 2). However, Comte was not a progressive philosopher of social science. The new directions for societal change that he envisioned were conservative. In a draft of his book on the civil war in France, Karl Marx noted that Comte “was known to the Paris workers as the prophet of personal dictatorship in politics, capitalist rule in political economy, hierarchy in all spheres of human activity, even in science, the creator of a new catechism, a new Pope, and new saints to replace old ones.” Interestingly, Comte gave private lectures on his “positive philosophy” (later called “positivism”) but was not given an academic chair in a French university.

In the 1930s, in one of the first probing analyses of the meaning of what sociologists were doing, Robert Lynd proposed that the knowledge produced by a critical sociology is required so that democracy can “continue to be the active guiding principle of our culture.” In his critical book Knowledge for What?, which began as a set of lectures at Princeton University, Lynd argued that sociology should focus on practical problems in need of reform. Operating with an interdisciplinary focus that questioned the building of self-
perpetuating academic traditions, Lynd called for research oriented toward democratic principles.

In this book we call for the practice of emancipatory sociology but do not call for an end to all sociological practice linked to funding by the nation state or by foundations. In the present moment, these research efforts often generate some valuable knowledge about the structure and reality of U.S. society, such as in sociological research projects dealing with the corporate abandonment of central cities (for example, the research of William Julius Wilson). Nevertheless, many of these more traditional social science research projects directly or indirectly reinforce the oppressive structures of society, if only by not challenging those structures with strong alternatives going beyond the limits of present-day politics. We call here for greater democratic access to all social science knowledge. Scientific knowledge is shared by some in our day as a commodity that confers the power to control nature, to shape other human beings, and to improve ourselves. Knowledge is power, and some, like Michel Foucault, use one word, power/knowledge, to describe the two.

We call for the reassertion of a sociological practice designed to empower ordinary people through social science knowledge. By having better access to critical sociological knowledge, people will be in a better position to understand the world they live in, to plan their individual and collective lives, and to relate in an egalitarian and democratic fashion to others. This includes being in a better position to struggle for individual and collective rights. A broad-based democracy cannot be fully developed in our era with certain key types of knowledge being available mainly to those at the top and their professional servants.

We call for more egalitarian access to relevant scientific knowledge. Too much social science today is top-down research that neglects the experiences, realities, and concerns of those who are marginalized and oppressed. We believe that a renewed social science commitment to human liberation and social justice—a shift to the “for whom” and “for what” relevance of social science research and writings—can radically reshape the scientific practice and product that sociology and other social science disciplines regularly generate.

As we have seen in the case of Project Censored, a major aim of a countercultural sociology is to raise both the researchers' and the people's consciousness of the oppressive structures of the society in which we live. A related goal is to reduce, if not stop, that oppression and suffering. As we will make clear in subsequent chapters, liberation sociology follows in the paths of early sociologists like Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois, who connected their sociological ideas to social activism, and of C. Wright Mills who proposed that a sociological imagination allows people “to grasp what is going on in the world and to understand what is happening in themselves as minute points of the intersections of biography and history within society.”

Oppression: A Central Sociological Problem

Questioning Social Hierarchy

Questioning and researching hierarchies of class, gender, and racial power are at the heart of a sociology of liberation and emancipation. Liberation sociology is generally concerned with the oppression of various groups in society, including those with alternative lifestyles, cultures, and different sexual orientations. Everyday life is interaction, with most people coming into contact with others every day. Our social relationships are shaped by societal structures and forces, including racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, class exploitation, and other processes of domination and oppression. Such social forces are expressed in both informal networks and bureaucratic organizations. Sociologists have long observed what the effects of these and other social forces are on people enmeshed in them—much in the way physicists infer the existence of the force called gravity.

Since early in the history of the discipline, many progressive sociologists have questioned the major inequalities in the societal distribution of resources in the United States and in the world. However, at least since the 1920s, mainstream sociology has often avoided or tiptoed around major issues of elite power and coercion, especially in regard to class, racial, and gender exploitation and oppression. In recent decades, when mainstream sociologists have treated power, they have often preferred to research legitimate power (sometimes called “authority”) rather than illegitimate power. In addition, they have largely ignored the ruling class at the helm of society. For example, most social scientists who have researched social class and
social mobility in U.S. society have limited themselves to social classes below the level of the ruling class, the top elite. This can be seen in classical studies of social mobility such as *Opportunity and Change* by David Featherman and Robert Hauser.\(^{25}\) Clearly, the social sciences sometimes play a very conservative role in society. A glaring example is the widely discussed book *The Bell Curve*, by social scientists Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray. This book, which sold more than a half million copies, argues against social equality as conceived in the American Declaration of Independence. By its defense of the meaningfulness of the so-called IQ test differentials between black and white students for government policy, it has contributed to the rationalization of racial oppression in the United States.\(^{26}\) As Alvin Gouldner once noted, social science has a “dialectical character and contains both repressive and liberative dimensions.”\(^{27}\)

In the United States, deeply critical analyses of power and hierarchy are resisted by most captains of industry, politicians, and mainstream intellectuals and by much of the general public. The nation's traditionally white and male leadership resists such probing analyses because these will likely make obvious the unfairness of the existing distribution of social positions and material and symbolic rewards. Since the leaders and public do not ask for such critical analyses of power, it is easy for many sociologists to take the position that it is not their responsibility to research or correct power and resource inequalities. In contrast, the sociology of liberation embraces concerns about social inequality and the illegitimacy of the powers that be, and it takes the additional step of choosing the processes and institutional arrangements that produce this deepening inequality as its central problem. We underscore the act of choosing what should be studied because this is the crucial and indispensable decision in sociological practice. Injustice should be examined not just in its maldistribution of goods and services but also in the social relations responsible for that distribution. These social relations, among which oppressive power relations are a key part, are responsible for the way in which social goods are distributed. They also determine whether individuals, families, and other groups are integrated into or excluded from society's important decision-making processes. And they also shape the development of identities and the sense of belonging and dignity. In the end social justice is more than a question of redistribution of power, more than a matter of resolving within existing relations the injustice in how goods are distributed. It is a matter of totally restructuring the larger framework of social relations.

Important among the major social oppressions are racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and class exploitation. A leading feminist sociologist, Dorothy E. Smith, has argued that mainstream sociology is linked to the dominant ideological apparatus of U.S. society, which accounts for its historical emphasis on research issues primarily of concern to (white) men. For the most part, mainstream sociology's themes, she notes, are “organized by and articulare the perspectives of men—not as individuals ... but as persons playing determinate parts in the social relations of this form of society.”\(^{28}\) For many decades now, feminist sociologists and others representing socially subjugated groups have pressured social scientists to research the social world from the perspectives of the oppressed and to take their experiences seriously as a source of knowledge (see Chapter 7).

The structures of domination and oppression are not social phenomena to be examined among the other parts and processes of a static “social system,” because the term “social system” is laden with the assumption that societal arrangements are harmonious in some sense and that change in one element brings a change in other elements and in the general organization of the system (see the discussion of Talcott Parsons in Chapter 3). Although some relations in society exhibit an equilibrating or harmonious character, many relations do not show any such character. Exploitation, exploitation, domination, and oppression are processes that produce and reproduce the way Western societies like the United States are arranged. To characterize a social arrangement as a social system without explaining how it was initially created and how it is now being reproduced, takes for granted an immutable and beyond our reach what we need to actively observe and change.

Many sociologists—particularly those who have the best-paying, most stable jobs—are white men, and they can often live so that they are more or less isolated from the more severe consequences of much social oppression. Moreover, C. Wright Mills once cogently noted that “most social scientists have had little or no sustained contacts with such sections of the community as have been
insurgent; there is no left-wing press with which the average academic practitioner in the course of his career could come into mutually educative relations.”

**What Is Social Oppression?**

In a probing analysis, political scientist Iris Young has suggested that oppression and domination are disabling constraints that affect the “institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation.” Domination involves “institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participating in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions.” Loving parents, for example, who make a practice of making decisions without consulting their children when they are old enough to make their own choices disable them through their domination. In like fashion, various benevolent dictators disable and disempower the people whose good they claim to seek.

Oppression consists of “systematic institutional processes which prevent some people from learning and using satisfying and expansive skills in socially recognized settings or institutionalized social processes which inhibit people’s ability to play and communicate with others or to express their feelings and perspective on social life in contexts where others can listen.” The persecution and killing of Jews and Gypsies in Nazi Europe, the exploitation of farm laborers in the United States, the pillage of aboriginal people’s lands in the name of progress, the enslavement of Africans in the Americas, and the sweatshops still found in U.S. and other Western cities are examples of this oppression. Those who must work for less pay on account of their class, racial, ethnic, sexual orientation, or gender status are oppressed. Although oppression often includes material deprivation, the issues involved go beyond an unequal distribution of goods and resources. Oppression eliminates or reduces human dignity and the capacity to express oneself and participate in the larger society as effectively as those who are more privileged.

The oppression of women has been a central issue of the current era. For example, in her famous 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan wrote of the troubled North American housewife, especially the white suburban housewife, as being in a state of recurring personal distress. Though most lived in enviable circumstances by international standards, they often felt cheated and suffered from numerous gendered afflictions that came to be known as “housewives’ fatigue.” Friedan did not write her book merely to engage the reader’s sympathy but to show that these women were being prevented from self-realization through gendered oppression and cultural conspiracy; this “feminine mystique” led women to believe that their happiness lay only in the kitchen and nursery. Friedan’s analyses were part of the new feminist resurgence of the 1960s. In the years that followed, Friedan’s analysis was criticized for neglecting the central concerns of working-class women and women of color, especially those who had long worked outside the home. Eventually, the concerns of many women became part of a complex women’s liberation movement. The concept of oppression, as it has been used in social movements since the 1960s, generally designates inhibitions people suffer “in their ability to develop and exercise their capacities and express their needs, thoughts, and feelings.”

Here we underscore the institutional and embedded character of contemporary oppression. In one sense, the term “oppression” covers the tyranny that a despot or ruling group exercises over others. For example, in twentieth-century Europe numerous fascist and Communist regimes oppressed their peoples in political terms. Yet there are other forms of contemporary oppression that do not involve this overt tyranny by force but rather are embedded, structural, well-institutionalized, and more or less hidden—in social norms and beliefs extending over long periods of time. Another term for this is “begemony,” or domination with “a velvet glove.” In today’s forms of oppression, many individuals that contribute to maintaining and reproducing the various oppressions see themselves as merely doing their jobs and living out normal lives. If asked, they would strongly reject the view that they could be agents of oppression. Our emphasis on broad social processes and long-term institutions allows us to understand the apparent paradoxes of the oppressed sometimes contributing to their own victimization and even turning into oppressors of others.

In this society there are privileged and oppressed groups of people who differ in the goods, resources, and opportunities this society makes available and in the degree to which they participate in
societal decisionmaking that greatly affects their daily lives. These differences are hard to deny, even though some might choose not to see their continuing reality and group nature. Indeed, as W.E.B. Du Bois noted, some groups are privileged because others are oppressed. For example, the extreme poverty and degradation in the African colonies of European nations was "a main cause of wealth and luxury in Europe. The results of this poverty were disease, ignorance, and crime. Yet these had to be represented as natural characteristics of backward peoples." Centuries of colonial exploitation of African labor and land had long been omitted from major historical reviews of European prosperity and development. A similar situation exists for the prosperity of generations of white Americans, whose prosperity is very deeply rooted in four centuries of exploitation of the labor and land of African Americans and other people of color in North American history. A similar argument could be made for the privileges of men in regard to the conditions of women. This historical background is too often ignored or downplayed in contemporary accounts of discrimination, especially in the mass media.

The heterogeneous society that is the United States is clearly differentiated in terms of oppressed and privileged peoples. We wish to gain some distance from arguments built upon the assumption of a homogeneous "American public," as found in much sociology of culture. Too often the term "Americans" in the mass media and in scholarly writings means "white Americans," and little thought is given by the commentators to the fact that a large proportion of the population may not share the view or behavior attributed to those "Americans." Political and academic viewpoints that attempt to pass themselves off as neutral, or that claim a national consensus, are more often than not the viewpoints of the privileged.

The particular meanings attached to social differences—which make them seem natural, traditional, or necessary—are deeply embedded in our stock of knowledge. As a result, we come to think nothing of them and often consider them as features of the social contexts that go without questioning. A sociology of liberation questions and uncovers the hidden aspects of these concrete, historically given social arrangements so that they can be acted upon and their oppression undercut.

Humanization and Critical Consciousness

Increasing Humanization

One conceptual starting point for our endeavor is the human vocation, the calling to be fully human. Seldom stated in conventional sociology, the initial assumptions of the researcher need to be made explicit, for they shape research much more than just in its methodological principles. The statement of underlying domain assumptions is an important means for preserving the integrity of research; a topic we will examine in some detail later.

The late Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, wrote that while human beings have the potential for humanization and dehumanization, their true vocation is only humanization. Injustice, exploitation, the violence of oppressors—and their denial and dissimulation in euphemisms and ideologies—generate and undergird dehumanization. Our humanity is affirmed in struggles to achieve freedom and social justice. Dehumanization marks and defines the oppressor as much as it torments the oppressed. For Freire, the struggle to recover humanity is a struggle of the oppressed "to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well." Oppressors who exploit and exclude by virtue of their power ordinarily cannot find the strength to liberate anyone. At best, they soften their grip and become gentler in exercise of power. And the unjust social order, which makes generosity difficult, must remain in place and continues to nourish "death, despair, and poverty." Liberation sociology struggles to disrupt or destroy the causes and realities of oppression, the taken-for-granted, "natural" order that supports it and makes it possible.

Facing Challenges in Communities

In the United States, sociology originated as a field whose early practitioners and thinkers were substantially committed to research for major social change. Among these were Jane Addams and W.E.B. Du Bois, whose work we examine in Chapters 3 and 4. Addams and Du Bois were what Antonio Gramsci has called "organic intellectuals," those from the oppressed sectors of society whose lived experience gives them superior understandings to those intellectuals from the advantaged sectors. Organic intellectuals work consciously for the liberation of their own oppressed groups, often
in local communities. Sociologists like Addams and Du Bois brought into social science, for the first time, the actual experiences, history, and culture of formerly excluded peoples. Not surprisingly, their early research was aimed at improving the lives of the poor, the working class, immigrants, and Americans of color. Sociology was to better the lives of the less powerful Americans, not to advance their careers or create a people-distancing discipline of sociology.

In later chapters we will see that there is much interesting social science research linking community activists and sociologists in common efforts to bring about social change. Some of this research is mainly evaluative; it attempts to assess the effectiveness of existing programs. Another approach is broader and tries to collectively spell out our community needs and how they might be addressed, and then works to help people deal with their problems. Such research is usually linked to community-defined goals.

Take the example of an organization called Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide, based in Atlanta, Georgia. This organization incorporates sociological research and theory into education and organizing projects. An activist organization headed and shaped by sociologists, it engages in workshops, action-research projects, and popular education projects across the country, but mostly in the South. Workshops are organized by and for community activists and activist scholars and are designed to help them better comprehend problems such as health care and the criminal “injustice” system. Project South’s action-research projects pull together teams of grassroots activists and social scientists to develop materials for popular education and community organizing. For example, one project has gathered oral histories and statistical data to describe socioeconomic conditions in Georgia communities and to discover what impact political campaign funds have on these areas. To this point in time, low-income neighborhoods in several large cities have been part of the project, and in each case the findings are put into a video and a popular pamphlet to use in workshops and for community organizing. Project South researchers begin the process of community discussion by conducting at least one local workshop to examine the research findings and often work with community leaders. Project South has also developed other projects, such as the Grassroots Popular Education Project, which is a resource-building program for grassroots organizations, and the Leadership Development Initiative, a development program for low-income grassroots leaders in Georgia.41

Significantly, several sociologists have been active in this organization, two of whom we mention briefly here. One is Jerome W. Scott, who in 2000 was the Director of Project South: Institute for the Elimination of Poverty and Genocide. Growing up in working-class Detroit, Scott “lived the reality of its poverty-stricken neighborhoods.”42 He is thus an organic intellectual whose sociological ideas have been honed by hard experience. After serving in Vietnam, Scott took courses at Lawrence Technical College but soon left for a job in an auto plant. There he participated in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, a workers’ group that pressed unions and management for more racial integration in auto plants. He also became part of groups of workers and scholars studying sociopolitical theory, including that of Karl Marx, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Malcolm X, in the context of building movements for change. This provided an important part of his sociological education. As he noted to us, “From both my lived experience and theory I developed an understanding of society rooted in class analysis and social struggle, as the larger historical and institutional context of white supremacy, male privilege, and U.S. global domination.”43 Subsequently working as a journalist, he traveled to Africa to do field reports. After moving to Atlanta in the late 1970s, he began work on social justice issues in the South. Soon he was working with community activists and activist sociologists and helped to found Project South. He also became involved in the American Sociological Association and the Association of Black Sociologists.44

An activist sociologist, Scott has coauthored articles and book chapters on U.S. history, globalization and the electronic revolution, race and class issues, and people’s movements for change. Recently, he noted the current challenges facing sociologists: “Today, as globalization in the electronic age sweeps the world, liberation sociology is being transformed; and those of us who are engaged are building bridges to the emerging bottom-up movement for global justice and equality. For me, liberation sociology is an essential part of the larger project of human liberation.”45

Another sociologist active in Project South is Walda Katz-Fishman, the current chair of the board at Project South. In a communication to us, she noted that her activism is rooted in her southern
family background. Growing up in the South, she saw her parents active in the civil rights movement, in civic and Jewish organizations, and in the Democratic Party. At an early age, she became aware of racial, class, and gender inequalities, "but did not have a framework for truly understanding the world, a clear vision, or a strategy for how to change it." After graduation from college, she attended graduate school in sociology at Wayne State University, where she became educated in a working-class perspective and in Marxist interpretations of society. "From that point on," she reported, "I was always developing my historical materialist worldview and participating in many activist arenas—from scholar activism among professional groups to anticapitalist movements building in multiracial and multiclass organizations, often with women in the leadership." Moving to Washington, D.C., in 1970, Katz-Fishman took a teaching position at Howard University. She continued developing her liberation sociology ideas and has taught many students about ideas and strategies of societal transformation. Like Scott, she has worked as a scholar and educator who uses her research work on class, race, and gender inequality to help grassroots organizations working for social justice. Katz-Fishman views her sociological education and research work as a crucial background and constant resource for her community activism. As she noted to us, "To me sociology is a key to understanding social history and society—its past, its present, and its future, i.e., what it is becoming. It offers me the tools for theoretically understanding the world and for practically transforming the world. But I have done and continue to do this within the collective process of study and movement building."

In such settings, one problem is getting both the researchers and the community activists to give up their jargon and communicate freely.

Although it may be seen by some mainstream social scientists as "biased" or "subjective," good collaborative research can be as carefully done and as meaningful as any other social science research (see Chapter 4). From the community point of view, good research provides people with ideas about how local change strategies can be more effective. All social research is pervaded by the perspectives of the researchers and of those funding or supporting the research. No research is conducted without underlying assumptions or without linkages to the structures of power and inequality in the society. Francis Moore Lappe has noted that "each of us carries within us a worldview, a set of assumptions about how the world works—that some call a paradigm—that forms the very questions we allow ourselves to ask and determines our views of future possibilities." Teaching Liberation Sociology

In the United States and other parts of the world, sociology is an academic discipline, with its teachings a part of the mainstream curriculum in numerous institutions of higher education and even in some high schools. Much of what is published and read within the disciplinary boundaries of these institutions is written by academicians. We should pay particular attention to the teaching of sociology because the sociology taught in high schools, colleges, and universities is or can be practiced in everyday life—as a way for individuals and small groups to examine the social conditions in which they live and the social consequences of individual and collective actions.

The teaching of the sociology of liberation is a process of creation of awareness, what Paulo Freire has called conscientization—a pedagogy of how oppressed people struggling for liberation can actually free themselves. The sociology of liberation is not just a sociology that discusses liberation; it is a sociology that can show or facilitate the way to it. Conscientization refers to "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality." An educator of
adults, Paulo Freire discovered that his pupils learned how to read and write much better when the learning of the details of language was associated with the acquisition of a critical consciousness. Learning how to read and the process of education in general were thus projects of human liberation.

Freire contrasts radicalization, the aim of his pedagogical method, with political sectarianism. Whereas radicalization nourished by a critical spirit is creative, “sectarianism, fed by fanaticism, is always castrating.” Radicalization literally means going to the root of things, a process that in Freire’s experience “involves increased commitment to the position one has chosen, and thus greater engagement in the effort to transform concrete, objective reality.” Political sectarianism of the right or the left, because it is “mythizing and irrational,” can create a wrongheaded image of social reality and a sense of futility in changing that reality. This distinction between radicalization and sectarianism is vital to a viable sociology of liberation. As we see it, the goal of this liberation sociology is not to replace one dominant mythology with another but to contribute substantially to the freedom of human beings from the dominant reality-distorting mythologies.

Karl Marx once wrote that he did not seek to anticipate the world for all time to come but to engage in relentless criticism of existing reality. This does not mean hurling distorted and undocumented critiques at the way other people act or think. Liberation sociologists try to stay deeply connected to empirical reality, with what they can discover about the daily experience of the members of a society, including global society. A full empirical understanding of a society like the United States leads to the knowledge that it and especially its social hierarchies are systematically structured in the wrong way, for full human self-realization. In the nineteenth century, Marx studied the concrete realities of capitalism and came to the conclusion that the logic of modern capitalist societies “made injustice, alienation, and exploitation inevitabilities rather than contingencies.”

Without this empirical connection to everyday life and its constraints, there is no viable sociology. For liberation sociology, this connection between the empirical reality that sociologists study and sociologists’ subjectivity—personal commitments, social biases, and existential coefficients of all sorts—is part of an ongoing dialectical and reflective process. Subjectivity often provides the impetus to explore the objective world.

Liberation sociology does not seek to establish certainty for all time, as nineteenth-century sociologists sometimes tried to do. Practitioners of the sociology of liberation study reality so they and others can better transform it. They are not afraid of people or of participating with others in the search for knowledge. The liberation sociologist is not afraid of becoming an activist-researcher committed to an oppressed people’s history or to fight on their side. Liberation sociologists are the antitheses of the liberal intellectuals who believe they are liberators of the oppressed because of their copyright on some progressive ideas. The critical consciousness at the heart of liberation sociology is self-reflective. Decisions about studying a problem and the methods for its analysis are acts of judgment and are made possible only by previous human experiences.

What Type of Society Will We Have?

Taking Sides with the Oppressed

If sociology is to become a stronger intellectual framework for people struggling for liberation from the structures and mystiques of domination, then sociologists need to decide on the type of sociology they will practice and whose interests they will serve. Sociologists, like other social scientists, make choices as to the problems they are going to devote their energies to, the terms in which they will cast research questions, and the research methods they will utilize. They do not make such choices in a social vacuum but typically as they struggle to provide for themselves and their families, achieve financial security, and earn tenure and other personal career goals.

A decision to practice liberation sociology is a decision to take sides with the oppressed. Liberation sociology is committed to the causes of the oppressed, exploited, and dominated. Mainstream sociology is often committed, albeit frequently in disguised ways, to vested interests in the established societal hierarchies. The noncommittal attitude of much sociology today—usually formulated as scientific detachment, objectivity, or value freedom—is too often a cover-up for the accommodation the research has made with dominant group interests. Mainstream sociology, like other intellectual
endeavors, is part of the political, social, and psychological status quo. To ignore or deny the political, social, and psychological origins of our own sociological thinking and discipline is to make sure that the latter will be rooted in a troubled status quo. An eloquent examination of the social forces at play in the decision to take sides with the oppressed was provided by W.E.B. Du Bois: “The educated and cultured of the world, the well born and well bred, and even the deeply pious and philanthropic” cannot escape the contradiction that they “receive their training and comfort and luxury, the ministrations of delicate beauty and sensibility, on condition that they neither inquire [too closely] into the real source of their income and the methods of distribution nor interfere with the legal props which rest on a pitifull human foundation of writhing white and yellow and brown and black bodies.”

In our view social researchers should make every effort to do honest and open research work and to minimize as best they can the intrusion of assumptions and inclinations that can distort that work. We support “objectivity” in this sense, although we also recognize that this task is not necessarily an easy one. Indeed, it is often the countercurrent sociologists who have the greatest ability to be objective and socially truthful because they demystify established interpretations of oppressive social arrangements. As Sandra Harding has noted, the democratic values that legitimate critical analysis of established structures from the viewpoint of the dispossessed “tend to increase the objectivity of the results of research.” As the social sciences become more diverse in terms of who does social science, the field embraces a broader array of perspectives, and more critical questions are raised about traditional perspectives and hidden societal realities. In addition, by regularly bringing in the social and historical contexts of social science, one can increase its objectivity by reducing its parochialism. Democracy-enhancing practices can only improve science, whereas democracy-retarding practices—the traditional practices of much natural and social science—can only limit and handicap science.

One of sociology’s great contributions to modern thought is that it encourages us to think about the socially patterned nature of the world around us. Early European sociologists like Max Weber and Emile Durkheim wrote about broad societal forces such as industrialization, bureaucratization, and urbanization. Yet these are not the only processes that characterize the modern period in Western societies; the differentiating processes of exploitation, social discrimination, and oppression also distinguish the period.

These latter realities were perhaps best understood by other early, though less well-known, sociologists such as Jane Addams, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Anna Julia Cooper. All of the latter analyzed issues of discrimination and exploitation in their efforts to understand U.S. society. Experiencing social oppression firsthand, the white women and black men and women sociologists saw what most white men at the time could not, that “social difference is the first consequence of modern society and, thus, the more reasonable first principle of sociology.” A relevant sociology must be grounded in the studied realization of the extent to which U.S. society, as well as other societies, are founded in social differentiation, inequality, and oppression.

Taking an Overt Moral Stance

As we see it, the flight from issues of morality and ethics in social science must be ended. Beyond a desire for a deeper understanding of exploitation and oppression, liberation sociology takes an overt moral stance, which includes identification and empathy with the victims of oppression and a calling for and working toward their liberation from misery and inequality. Sociology can liberate when it applies its humanistic concern and empathetic reasoning to solving the everyday problems afflicting human beings. In this book we openly adopt a broad human rights standard for social research, affirm the value of humanization, and call for maximizing human self-realization and achievement. A start for a broad human rights standard, which has international resonance, is the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This international agreement stipulates in Article 1 that “all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and in Article 7 that “all are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.” Article 8 further asserts: “Everyone has the right to an effective remedy . . . for acts violating the fundamental rights,” and Article 25 states that these rights extend to everyday life: “Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and his family, including food,
clothing, housing.” From this increasingly influential international perspective, no one can be expected to take care of their family and civic responsibilities without adequate daily sustenance and freedom from intrusive discriminations and oppressions (see Chapter 8). We believe that this commitment to basic and broad human rights and freedoms should be the starting point for sociological research and analysis.

An important example of an interweaving of sociological analysis and moral concerns is liberation theology, a powerful tradition among Catholic activists in postcolonial countries, especially in South and Central America. For some time now, liberation theology has drawn in part on sociological writings, and, in turn, liberation theology has influenced the thinking of sociologists, including ourselves. Stan Bailey, a sociology graduate student, made this cogent comment on a draft of this book:

I am an ex-priest trained in liberation theology in Córdoba, Argentina, where I spent nearly a decade working with oppressed communities. As a priest, what kept me going was the perspective of solidarity with the poor, and doing theology from the bottom up—being a voice for those denied a voice. Now, to hear the same terms being used to indicate a certain type of sociological praxis is gratifying. ... It never ceases to amaze me the narrowness into which we can fall through our specialized knowledge. We reduce the world to our disciplines with their internal rules and regulations, and their authorities who determine the true path. Don’t we realize the futility of our intellectual conclusions for most of the world’s population living in subhuman conditions? Our “ivory towers” distort our visions and move us along in the justification of the powerful.

Liberation theology emerged in Latin America in response to the inadequacy of doctrinaire European theology for priests doing pastoral work among the disenfranchised and the poor. In 1968 liberation theology came to the world’s attention as a result of the second meeting of the Latin American Bishops’ Council in Medellín, Colombia. At that meeting Father Gustavo Gutierrez and others called for new church initiatives to meet the economic and social justice needs of the poor in Latin America. As a result, these Catholic bishops declared that the Catholic church should have a “preferential option for the poor,” the liberation theology phrase for taking sides with the oppressed. The concern with what must be done in pastoral work when one is committed to the poor and disenfranchised is a central trait of liberation theology around the world.

Looking Beneath the Surface

In ancient Roman myth, the giant Cacus lived in a cave and once stole some oxen from Hercules, then dragged them backward into his cave. When Hercules came seeking his cattle, he saw tracks that indicated that the cattle had gone out of the cave, and he was initially deceived. All too often modern social analysts are like the puzzled Hercules. They note the shape of the cave and count the number and direction of the footprints, but do not dig deeper into the social realities that the observations represent. A number of social science commentators have noted that if social life were only what it seemed to be on its surface, there would be no need for social science.

Too much mainstream analysis of U.S. society, economy, and politics reflects a status-quo ideology that denies or hides this society’s distortions or contradictions.” One of the tragedies of any society is the failure of its people and leaders to understand the real social problems confronting them. For example, today modern capitalism seems to be riding high, with many analysts, pundits, business leaders, and academics singing its praises. Indeed, there is a general denial of the underlying social and economic troubles created for millions of Americans, and billions of the other residents of planet earth, by modern capitalism. In Chapter 8 we report on a recent survey of the world’s top newspapers. In a database of fifty major national newspapers, we found not one serious article probing in depth the fundamental problems and deep-lying crises of contemporary U.S. capitalism.

The United States appears to be on a path of increasing social conflict, of accentuated economic and other inequalities, and of environmental degradation shaped by such trends as global warming and the deterioration of the ozone layer. The social contradictions of capitalism are becoming ever more evident to those who attend to the data. Clearly, there is no historical reason to expect the social system of capitalism to last forever. The failures of other societal
systems, such as the demise of state Communism in Eastern Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, have received far more academic and mass media attention than the present and coming structural crises of capitalism and of U.S. society. Political debates over balancing the federal budget, cutting social programs, terminating affirmative action, and trends in Social Security and Medicare have been conducted with little reference to the growing income and wealth inequalities underlying capitalist societies. Today, many large U.S. corporations are part of a global market system and are directing more of their profit-making activities to low-wage areas overseas, as they close U.S. plants and eliminate many decent-paying jobs. While many corporations have made very good profits, their economic “advances” have come at great cost to U.S. workers and their families. In the United States the real wages of most ordinary workers are lower today that they were two decades ago, a situation that has forced many to take on extra jobs or put more family members to work. The so-called free market is celebrated by many social analysts as the solution for socioeconomic problems overseas just as it is creating recurring economic problems and severe environmental problems for the entire planet.

The increasing inequalities of income and wealth have been rationalized by many politicians, media commentators, and intellectuals—often with attacks on the principles of equality that ostensibly underlie the democratic institutions of the United States. Human societies are controlled substantially by elites who take overt and covert actions to shape society in terms of their interests. Oppressing classes and the bureaucratic organizations they control hide many of their exploitative operations from the public and do not wish for social scientists to do research on systems of oppression. In analyzing society, liberation sociologists try to dig beneath these overt rationalizations and fictions. Major tasks for critical social scientists are to ascertain the larger social framework around such actions and how the actions arose or developed. Indeed, one liberating aspect of sociology is its observational curiosity. At its best, sociology provides a useful collection of interpretive concepts and methods, and it relies on actual field observations, interviews, experimentation, and comparison to reach conclusions about conditions in society. Sociologists can help liberate societies because they can provide a deeper understanding of their oppressive realities.

Empirical Social Science

Our defense of empirical science here may appear to fly in the face of much postmodernist questioning of science. Early in the history of social science the application of observation and reason through the scientific method was thought to bring societal progress. Scientific reasoning would make us free once we rid ourselves of ancient prejudices, but this promise was never delivered. Thus, a critical questioning of the physical and social sciences is certainly justified. Although reasoning in science can be used to liberate, it has also been used to oppress or exterminate.

However, some of the sociological methods used to buttress systems of oppression, as we show later in this book, can also be used to liberate human beings. For example, sociological methods in the hands of many corporate advertisers reduce human awareness and hide the business interest in manipulating human needs and generating unnecessary consumption. An example is the use of focus groups, an old sociological research method, to find out how to manipulate people into buying consumer products they do not need. Social science research clearly can have a repressive potential, as in the marketing research designed to get people to behave against their own interests. The tobacco industry, for example, availed itself of social science research techniques to produce some advertisement campaigns, such as those targeting younger people and those living in low-income neighborhoods in the United States and overseas. On the other hand, the same sociological methods can be used to help human beings be more conscious of, and better equipped to fight, advertisers and related corporate interests that try to ensnare them.

Many sociologists and other social scientists who go into the field are dramatically enlightened if not radicalized. Field research has radicalizing potential because it often reveals what researchers do not expect, or do not wish, to see. Moreover, field sociologists have been among the first to bring to public attention the issues of youth culture, bureaucratic structure, racial discrimination, changing roles for women in society, the problems of individualism, divorce’s impact on society, and the regulation of the poor by government agencies in the interests of capitalism. An example of the latter is sociologist Richard Cloward’s and political scientist Frances Fox Piven’s Regulating the Poor (1971), a study that
showed how some government programs for the poor have expanded or contracted in relationship to the needs of the employers for low-wage labor. Sociologists have also been at the forefront of those documenting the oppressive conditions faced by Americans of color, including African, Latino, and Asian Americans. Examples of this are the classical field study by Gunnar Myrdal and his associates, *An American Dilemma* (1944), and the major field study by sociologists Leo Grebler, Joan Moore, and Ralph Guzmán, *The Mexican-American People* (1970). Field sociologists have often given the best pictures of juvenile delinquency, drug cultures, the homeless, and working-class lives. It is in much of this probing field research that we see the liberation potential and reality of contemporary sociology.

**Probing the Underlying Assumptions**

Whether it is acknowledged or not, all social research has an underlying perspective and moral stance. Examining critically the problems of powerful nation states and corporations requires a bold and reinvigorated moral position that asserts the rights of human beings as world citizens. As we noted previously, those researchers who work for and are supported by a nation state are not likely to collect data or develop analyses subversive to that state, including such phenomena as colonialism and imperialism.

Alvin Gouldner noted the ways in which the social sciences have been shaped by their sociocultural environments. Thus, major social theories such as the structural-functionalist theory of Talcott Parsons provide an “anxiety-reducing reorientation” to the world for those who prefer the status quo. Historian Dorothy Ross has suggested that in the United States the various social sciences have been shaped by a shallow historical perspective, a practical outlook, and a confidence in technical methods. U.S. social scientists have often shared the optimistic views of ordinary citizens that the United States was different from the nations of Europe and could solve the problems of class conflict and poverty. By arguing for an American exceptionalism, U.S. social scientists have too often embraced “a scientism that proceeds in dangerous ignorance of historical differences and societal complexity.”

In social science research, bias appears in many places, and not the least in the choice of research topic and agenda. Too often those who do conventional social science research become hired hands selling their research skills to whomever has the power to command them. In such cases, “objectivity” has too often meant the use of statistical methods that are operationalized so narrowly that the choice of research topic is not considered to be an area of possible bias. Sandra Harding has noted that “many critics of the natural sciences argue that racist and Eurocentric political concerns shaped the questions the sciences have asked and this is why the results of such research have been racist and Eurocentric.” Similarly, the choice of research topics in the social sciences is not independent of the values of the researchers.

**Questioning Postivistic Social Science**

As we will show in the next few chapters, an instrumental-postivistic research perspective has come to dominate numerous areas of social science in the United States and in a few other countries across the globe. Clearly, the phrase “positivistic science” has had a number of different meanings since Comte accepted the idea early in the nineteenth century (see Chapter 2). For example, some analysts use the phrase for any social science approach that seeks to develop laws of human social behavior.

However, in this book we define positivistic social science as having at least these elements: (1) attempting to delineate enduring laws of social life with little or no consideration of historical contexts; (2) accenting the quantitative processing of data on the dimensions of social life, which are generally reduced to discrete operationalized “variables”; (3) generally ignoring those aspects of human life that cannot be measured quantitatively, such as human imagination and the holistic complexity of phenomena; (4) conceiving of knowledge as something generated by a certain type of instrumental method— and thus downplaying other types of human knowledge; and (5) accenting a “value-free” research and thus ignoring or downplaying the underlying assumptions and values of those doing the scientific research.

This positivistic social science is distinctively North American in its origins. It has been termed by some an “abstracted empiricism”
or perhaps most accurately, “instrumental positivism.” It is “instrumental” in that it limits social research to only those questions that certain research instruments and techniques will allow, and it is “positivism” in that it commits social scientists to research approaches generally mimicking those of the natural sciences. One of the early founders of U.S. sociology, Franklin H. Giddings, put the matter succinctly, and in gendered language, in a definitive and influential 1909 American Journal of Sociology commentary: “We need men not afraid to work; who will get busy with the adding machine and the logarithms, and give us exact studies, such as we get in the psychological laboratories, not to speak of the biological and physical laboratories. Sociology can be made an exact, quantitative science, if we can get industrious men interested in it.”

In the chapters that follow we will use the terms “quantitative positivism” or “instrumental positivism” for the social science research that more or less encompasses these basic assumptions and inclinations. However, we should emphasize a broader point here: The practice of social science in the United States is generally permeated by what might be termed a “positivistic culture.” This larger positivistic culture is so powerful that some who practice a social science that is often considered antipositivistic—such as phenomenologists, ethnomethodologists, and discourse analysts—can adopt in their qualitative research procedures some of the traits and trappings of positivism. Abigail Fuller notes that in our positivistic culture much “knowledge is fragmented, specialized, and divorced from its historical and social context, and as such, is robbed of its critical functions.”

Since World War II, many leading sociologists have emphasized the need for sociology to standardize and develop methodological “rigor” by using statistical techniques, survey methods, and the hypothetico-deductive framing of social analyses. As conventionally stated, this instrumental positivism involves developing formal hypotheses, using specified falsification procedures, basing theories only on statistical measurements, and being “value free,” whatever that may mean. The value-free position asserts that sociological research should be done in a technical and neutral way that allows it to be used by anyone who wishes to do so. However, the “idea of sociology for sale to all-comers also loses sight of the economics of truth. Empirical social research is expensive and therefore only available to those who can afford it.”

The repeated accent on certain types of traditional quantitative or survey research methods as the only way to do serious social science, and the teaching of narrowly defined social research techniques to many students, has far-reaching societal consequences. Sheldon Wolin has noted that a heavy accent on traditional positivistic research techniques in social science “affects the way in which the initiates will look upon the world and especially the political portion of it. ‘Methodism’ is ultimately a proposal for shaping the mind.... [I]ts assumptions are such as to reinforce an uncritical view of existing political structures and all they imply.” Furthermore, Thomas Kuhn, in his influential The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, is critical of much scientific education for being as narrow as orthodox theology. For that reason, this type of education produces few students who ask new boundary-breaking questions and discover new paradigms and approaches.

Countersystem sociologists are often interested in looking critically at their own field—engaging in a self-reflective sociology that looks closely at their academic settings. Gouldner commented on the dilemma of academic sociologists: “For tenured faculty, the university is a realm of congenial and leisurely servitude. It is a realm in which the academician is esteemed for his learning but castigated as a political figure.” That is, the professor can be a “tiger in the classroom” while being a “pussycat in the Dean’s office” and, too often, in the outside society. All social scientists have to accept the existing system some of the time, but many rarely or never make attempts to question or change the oppressive system around them. In contrast, the liberation impulse in sociology teaches us that we must resist the blatant and subtle internal oppressions in our own circumstances, as well as elsewhere in the society.

**Conclusion**

Throughout this book, we ask “Social science for what purpose?” and “Social science for whom?” In proposing a liberation sociology, we give a humanistic, democratic, and activist answer to these questions. Liberation sociology can be a tool to increase the human ability to understand deep social realities, to engage in dialogue with
others, and to increase democratic participation in the production and use of knowledge. Making oppression more visible and forcing public discussions of it are essential tasks. Mills put it this way: "It is the political task of the social scientist... continually to translate personal troubles into public issues, and public issues into the terms of their human meaning for a variety of individuals." A critical, committed sociology can help those who are powerless to become more powerful. It can give voice to those who are oppressed and voiceless. For example, it can help women and people of color to understand better where and how sexism and racism operate and suggest useful countermeasures. Or it can also help white male workers who join right-wing supremacist groups like the militias to understand why they feel alienated and why reactionary ideologies play into the hands of their own class oppressors.

Well-established research methodologies, such as face-to-face interviews and social surveys, can be coupled with newer approaches such as Dorothy E. Smith’s institutional ethnographies of schools. For Smith, such a field ethnography means more than observation and interviewing; it means a commitment to finding out how a social entity really works in its actual practices and everyday relationships. Discovering social facts can thus involve a diversity of social science methods. For example, some researchers have made good use of the diaries and other materials left by the victims of the Nazi Holocaust to get at the everyday realities of this extreme oppression and genocide. In South Africa, new methods were pioneered by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which has looked into the atrocities of the old apartheid system. They have sought out the voices of the survivors of this often violent oppression in order to air the truth about the horrors of that apartheid and thus to allow the nation to face its future with its eyes wide open. Similarly in Chile, after the Pinochet dictatorship, a special national committee investigated and assembled data on the civil-rights abuses of that brutal regime with the hope of bringing about societal openness and eventual reconciliation.

The ultimate measure of the value of social science knowledge is not some type of propositional theory building but whether it sharpens our understanding of society and helps to build a more democratic and progressive society. Liberation sociology seeks to stimulate debate in the field of sociology and in the larger society over what humane societal arrangements would look like and how they could be implemented. To bring change, powerless human beings must be empowered. Liberation sociology can provide probing research that supports the struggles of the oppressed against classist, racist, sexist, heterosexist, and other authoritarian types of oppression. Liberation sociology is oriented toward people acting to change oppressive conditions that restrict human lives. Marx once wrote that people "make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." C. Wright Mills noted a qualification to this point: "Men are free to make history, but some men are much freer than others. Such freedom requires access to the means of decisions and of power by which history may now be made." Both Marx and Mills recognize that people are acting agents and can make or remake their history. A former secretary general of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, once put it this way: "We are not permitted to choose the frame of our destiny. But what we put in it is ours." Each member of this society is a part of the systems of oppression, for no one can escape, and all are part of the struggle to maintain or remove these systems. But we can choose which side to be on.
Preface


Chapter 1


3. It is now called *Critical Sociology*.


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


11. Ibid., p. 1.

12. Ibid., p. 8.

13. Ibid., p. 8.

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16. Ibid., p. 27.
24. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), p. 7. Some liberation sociologists have paid a substantial price. C. Wright Mills, for example, never was promoted to the rank of full professor.
31. Ibid., p. 38.
33. Ibid., p. 40.
34. Ibid., pp. 40–42.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid.
46. Walda Katz-Fishman, e-mail communication to authors, November 2000.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
59. Ibid., p. 118.
61. Sean Bailey, e-mail communication, spring 1996.
63. Ibid., p. 16.


67. See, for example, David A. Snow and Leon Anderson, Down on Their Luck (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

68. Gouldner, The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology, p. 86.


70. Levine, Visions of the Sociological Tradition, p. 80.


74. L. I. Bernard, “The Teaching of Sociology in the United States,” American Journal of Sociology 15 (October 1909): 196. His italics. The sexist phrasing of this comment is particularly important given the fact that many of the early founders were women sociologists, most of whom were also progressive activists.

75. Fuller, “Academics and Social Transformation,” p. 11.


77. Bryant, Positivism in Social Theory and Research, p. 142.


80. Gouldner, The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology, p. 441.


Chapter 2