We live in a powerful time, a time ripe with potential for good and ill. On the national agenda of most modern states are issues such as global warming, war, nation building, the global economy, human rights, and so on. I think it’s significant that the national association of sociologists in the United States (the American Sociological Association) has focused their annual meetings in 2010 and 2011 on such issues. The theme of the 2010 meeting was Toward a Sociology of Citizenship. The goal of the meeting was “to stimulate development of sociological approaches to a comparative transnational study of citizenship”; among the specific questions asked were “How are status categories (e.g., gender, age, race) and affiliations (e.g., religion, language, culture) used to define different levels or degrees of citizenship?” and “How has the growth of supra-national entities (e.g., international human rights regimes, global banking and financial systems, and multi-national corporations) affected the role or significance of citizenship in sub-national, national, and supranational communities?” (Footnotes, 2009).

The theme for the 2011 meeting is equally as pointed: Social Conflict: Multiple Dimensions and Arenas. In part the call for papers reads,

Sociology is the only social science that takes conflict as a major topic, and the only field that throughout its existence has been crucially centered on class,
race, and ethnicity. New fields focused on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are also concerned with conflict, but the intellectual driving force in most of these fields is a sociological perspective. (Collins, 2009)

To me, these themes not only give indication of the concerns of our time, they also point to the way sociology and theory came to exist in the first place. As Collins says, sociology has been concerned with “class, race, and ethnicity throughout its existence.” Comprehending these issues, and how sociology came to exist, is paramount for understanding theory, sociology, and in the end society itself and your place in it. All of these are wrapped up in the Enlightenment and modernity.

In this book, we’re going to begin thinking about society and your place in it using a specific view of modernity, one that assumes a rational actor and an ordered world that can be directed. It’s important that you understand that this approach to understanding modernity and knowledge is just one of many possibilities. So, this story of modernity is simply our beginning; it’s our touchstone, the place from which to organize our thinking. As we move through the book, you’ll find that many contemporary theorists, and even some classical ones, point to social factors and processes that make it difficult to be a reasoned social actor; and, there are theories that indicate that the social world may not be ordered, but, rather, is a kind of chaotic system. And, more fundamentally, the social world may not be objective, but may simply be a subjective attribution of meaning. Further, some critical theorists argue that the kind of modern knowledge we’re starting with is intrinsically linked to power and is thus oppressive. That’s why we are starting with this view of modernity and modern knowledge: It’s the ideal, and it’s the one that many people assume to be alive and well in modern democracy.

The Making of Modernity:
Social Factors and Intellectual Ideas

The words modern and modernity are used in a number of different ways. Sometimes modern is used in the same way as contemporary or up-to-date. Other times it’s used as an adjective, as in modern art or modern architecture. In the social disciplines, there has been a good bit of debate about the idea of modernity. Some argue that we are no longer modern, others that we never were, and still others that we are living in some different form of modernity, like liquid modernity. In the course of our time together you’ll find that there aren’t any clear answers to these issues. But, rather than attempting to give answers, my hope is that this book will help you ask good questions about our time and society. In fact, I would be most happy if after reading this book you have more questions than you started with.

As a historical period, modernity began in the seventeenth century and was marked by significant social changes, such as massive movements of populations from small local communities to large urban settings, a high division of labor, high commodification and use of rational markets, the widespread use of bureaucracy, and large-scale integration through national identities. In general, the defining institutions of modernity are nation-states and mass democracy, capitalism,
science, and mass media; the historical moments that set the stage for modernity are the Renaissance, Enlightenment, Reformation, the American and French Revolutions, and the Industrial Revolution.

But modernity is more than a period of time; it’s a way of knowing that is rooted in the Enlightenment and positivism. The Enlightenment was a European intellectual movement that began around the time Sir Isaac Newton published *Principia Mathematica* in 1686, though the beginnings go back to Bacon, Hobbes, and Descartes. The people creating this intellectual revolution felt that the use of reason and logic would enlighten the world in ways that fate and faith could not. The principal targets of this movement were the church and the monarchy, and the ideas central to the Enlightenment were progress, empiricism, freedom, and tolerance.

The ideas of progress and empiricism are especially significant. Prior to the Enlightenment, the idea of progress wasn’t important. The reason for this is that the dominant worldview had its basis in tradition and religion. Traditional knowledge is by definition embedded in long periods of time and thus resists change and progress. Religion is based upon revelation, which, again by definition, makes our learning about the world dependent upon God’s disclosure and not upon us developing or advancing it. In order for the modern idea of progress to make sense, the universe had to be seen in a specific light. Rather than a mix of physical and spiritual, as with religion or magic, the world had to be understood as simply empirical; and our knowing of this world was dependent upon our own efforts, our own observations using our five senses, and our own gathering of evidence. Traditional knowledge is valid if it stands the test of time; religious knowledge is valid if it is revealed by God; but modern knowledge is valid if and only if it is empirically tested and works.

The idea of progress is also tied up with what’s called positivism. The basic tenant of positivism is that theology and metaphysics are imperfect ways of knowing and that positive knowledge is based upon facts and universal laws. The ideal model for positivistic knowledge is science: *Science* assumes the universe is empirical, operates according the law-like principles, and that human beings can discover those laws. Further, the reasons to discover these laws are to explain, predict, and control phenomena for the benefit of humankind. Scientific knowledge is built up or accumulated as theories are tested and the untenable parts discarded. New theories are built upon the previous and those in turn are tested, and so on. It’s essential for you to notice that this business of testing is one characteristic that separates positivistic knowledge from all previous forms: The basis of accepting knowledge isn’t faith but doubt. It’s this characteristic of positivistic knowledge that gives progress its modern meaning.

**Modernity’s Two Projects**

Progress in modernity—and thus the intent of modern knowledge—is focused on two main arenas: technical and social. The technical project of modernity is generally the domain of science. In science knowledge is used to control the universe through technology. While we’ve come to see science as the bastion for the technical project of modernity, the responsibility for the social project is seemingly less focused, at least in our minds today. Generally speaking, the institutional responsibility for the social
project rests with the democratic state and the discipline best suited to provide knowledge for that project is sociology; at least, that was part of the intent.

Before we talk about sociology, there’s an important point I want you to see. Sociology is the study of society, but this idea of society is historically specific; it came into existence in and because of modernity. The word *society* came into the English language from French and has a Latin base. The Latin root for *society* means companion or fellowship and up until the middle of the eighteenth century it kept this basic meaning (Williams, 1983, pp. 291–292). Society thus initially referred to a group of friends or associates, like a legal or scientific society. But toward the end of the seventeenth and through the middle of the eighteenth centuries the idea of society was seen in more abstract ways, to refer to something not only bigger than face-to-face social interactions but also an objective entity that could act independently. This is what Durkheim (1895/1938) means when he refers to society as a *social fact*, which “consists of ways of acting, thinking, and feeling, external to the individual, and endowed with a power of coercion, by reason of which they control him” (p. 3). These ideas concerning society began to give people a language they could use to talk about such things as religion, education, family, economy, and so on as separate parts of a larger entity called society. Notice that society not only became more abstract and larger, it was seen in terms of a *system of interrelated parts*.

Along with these changes in the idea of society came an important shift in the use of the word *state* (Williams, 1983, pp. 292–293). In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries *state* was used to refer to any hierarchical order, such as the state of priests, state of knights, and as referring to the monarchy. In time the idea of state came to be used in the way we generally understand it today, in its political sense. The significance in this seemingly minor shift is that the state and society came to be seen as mutually defining one another. “To the extent there is something called ‘society,’ then this should be seen as a sovereign social entity with a nation-state at its centre that . . . regulates the life-chances of each of its members” (Urry, 2006, p. 168). But the two aren’t synonymous; they are two different but related spheres: the state as the organization of power and society as an organization of free people. The ideas were further differentiated with the use of *civil society*, especially in the political discourse of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here society is specifically seen as “of or belonging to citizens” (Williams, 1983, p. 57).

**America and the First Sociologists**

Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is generally seen as the founder of sociology. He was one of the first to use the term *sociology* and he literally wrote the book on positivism. Initially called *The Course of Positive Philosophy*, later translated and condensed by Harriet Martineau, Comte (1854/1898) argued that the progress of knowledge has gone through three phases: theological, metaphysical, and scientific, which he also called positive. He also gave theory a central place in scientific enterprise claiming that while theory is empirically based, the observation and meaningfulness of empirical facts is established theoretically. Equally important is that
Comte considered sociology to be the queen of sciences. He argued that like all knowledge, science progresses by building upon previous work and that sociology was the final expression of science, in that society was the pinnacle, the final step, of evolution. His own empirical motivation in sociology was to understand how society could be reorganized after the French Revolution (1789–1799) destroyed the monarchy. It was during this time, generally the same period as the American Revolution, that France began to embrace the principles of the Enlightenment along with the ideas of inalienable rights and citizenship.

In this use of sociology, the United States held a unique place. The first sociologists did not hold PhDs nor did they go to school to study sociology. They were generally found among the “thousands of ‘travelers,’ . . . who came to [the United States] to observe how the new revolutionary system worked” (Lipset, 1962, p. 5). In the beginning phases of modernity, the United States was seen as the first and purest experiment in democracy. Unlike Europe, where modern government had to contend with and emerge from feudalism, America was born in democracy. People thus came to the United States not only to experience freedom but also to observe how modern democracy worked. Sociology was and continues to be one of the best disciplines for inquiry into modernity’s social goals, precisely because it is the study of society.

Though there were many who came and studied, Harriet Martineau’s (1802–1876) work holds a special place, first because of her association with Comte. Of Martineau’s work in translation, Comte said,

Looking at it from the point of view of future generations, I feel sure that your name will be linked to mine, for you have executed the only one of those works that will survive amongst all those which my fundamental treatise has called forth. (as quoted in Harrison, 1913, p. xviii)

Martineau also wrote one of the first books of sociological method: How to Observe Morals and Manners (1838/2003), which she then used in her two-year study of American democracy, published in three volumes in 1837. Martineau is also significant because of her gender. She was among the first to bring the gender lens to bear on democracy. Martineau (2005) argued that the test of any democratic nation is the “condition of that half of society over which the other half has power” (p. 291). Her assessment of the condition of gender in the United States in the beginning of the nineteenth century is that “tried by this test, the American civilization appears to be of a lower order than might have been expected” (p. 291).

Of the importance of the United States for the study of society and democracy, Martineau (1838/2003) said,

The United States are the most remarkable examples now before the world of the reverse of the feudal system—its principles, its methods, its virtues and vices. In as far as the Americans revert, in ideas and tastes, to the past, this may be attributed to the transition being not yet perfected—to the generation which organised the republic having been educated amidst the remains of feudalism. (p. 46)
One of the guiding lights of modernity that directed Martineau’s work is the idea of natural law. **Natural law** is the notion that, apart from human institutions, there are laws and rights to which every human being adheres. The U.S. Declaration of Independence contains this idea in the phrase, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” This was Martineau’s (1838/2003) belief as well: “Every element of social life derives its importance from this great consideration—the relative amount of human happiness” (p. 25). Happiness—and its prerequisite, freedom—are thus a touchstone and concern for modern sociological analysis.

Early positivists, such as Martineau, were impressed with the need to evaluate how well any modern society was doing with regard to its purpose. Again, let me remind you that fundamental shifts occurred in modernity. One of the major changes had to do with government: the shift from rule by monarchy to rule by democracy administered through the nation-state. This shift also implied that people went from being subjects to being citizens with the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The Declaration of Independence continues, “to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men.” Thus, the purpose of the state in modernity is to secure and safeguard civil rights for its citizens. Here is the critical part for our discussion: Early social thinkers felt compelled to evaluate society’s progress.

**Theory and Its Place in Modernity**

Theory is at the heart of modern knowledge and science—theory is the basis of modern control (one of the goals of science)—and, most of your classes, whether it was explicit or not, are based on theoretical understandings. Yet there’s a line in pop culture that says, “It’s only a theory.” The truth of the matter is that apart from tradition and religion, theory is all we have. All scientific work is based on theory—science and technology in all its forms would not exist if it wasn’t for theory. Theories aren’t accepted on faith, nor are they time honored. In fact, the business of science is the continual attempt to disprove theories! Theories are accepted because they have stood up to the constant doubt and battering of scientists. Furthermore, “facts” are actually a function of theory: Scientific data are produced through testing and using theoretical perspectives and hypotheses. So, having “just a theory” is a powerful thing.

The first and most important function of theory is that it explains how something works or comes into existence—**theory** is a logically formed argument that explains an empirical phenomenon in general terms. I came across two statements that help illustrate this point. A recent issue of *Discover* magazine contained the first one: “Iron deficiency, in particular, can induce strange tastes, though it’s not known why” (Kagan, 2008, p. 16). There are many of these empirical observations in science and medicine. For example, it’s not known why some people get motion sickness and others don’t, nor is it known why more women
than men get Raynaud’s disease. Observations like these that simply link two empirical variables together are not theoretical.

The second statement appeared in an article about how exercise improves memory and may delay the onset of Alzheimer’s. In linking these variables, the article says, “It works like this: aerobic exercise increases blood flow to the brain, which nourishes brain cells and allows them to function more effectively” (deGroot, Redford, & Kinosian, 2008, p. 26). Unlike the first statement, this one offers an explanation of how things work. This function of theory is extremely important, especially for civic sociology. So in studying theory, always look for factors that, when connected, explain how something works or exists.

Theory is built out of assumptions, perspectives, concepts, definitions, and relationships. Our word perspective comes from the Latin perspectus, and it literally means “to look through.” Perspectives act like glasses—they bring certain things into focus and blur our vision to others. Perspectives thus determine what we see. Joel Charon (2001) explains it this way:

Perspectives sensitize the individual to see parts of reality, they desensitize the individual to other parts, and they guide the individual to make sense of the reality to which he or she is sensitized. Seen in this light, a perspective is an absolutely basic part of everyone’s existence, and it acts as a filter through which everything around us is perceived and interpreted. There is no possible way that the individual can encounter reality “in the raw,” directly, as it really is, for whatever is seen can be only part of the real situation. (p. 3)

In other words, we never directly experience the world; we encounter it through our perspectives. For a trained sociologist, every theory is based on a perspective, it is a way of seeing and not seeing the world.

All perspectives are built upon assumptions—things that we suppose to be true without testing them. There’s an old saying that goes like this: When you assume, you make an Ass out of U and Me. That saying is dead wrong. Human beings can’t begin to think, let alone act, without making assumptions. What makes an ass out of you and me is when we don’t acknowledge and critically examine the assumptions underlying our knowledge and actions.

There are three basic assumptions used in social theory: assumptions about human nature, the existence of society, and the purposes and goals of knowledge. Human nature may be seen as utterly social or egoistic, symbolic and flexible or genetically determined, rational or emotional, freely acting or determined, and so on. While there are a number of variations, the basic assumption about society is whether or not it exists objectively—as something that can act independently of the individuals that make it up. At one end of this continuum are those who assume that social structures are objective and strongly influence (or cause) human behavior. Theory that is based on this assumption seeks to explain and predict the effects of social processes using law-like principles. At the other end of the continuum are
those who argue that society does not exist objectively outside of human interpretation and action. These kinds of theories don’t try to predict human action at all; instead, they seek to understand and explain contextual social action. The assumption about purpose involves the value or ethics of theory and sociological work. At one end of this continuum are those that believe sociology should be value-free and only explain what exists. This is the ideal of science—knowledge for knowledge’s sake. At the other end of the spectrum are those that believe the purpose of theory and sociological work is to critique society and bring about change.

The concepts that theory uses are abstract. The reason for this is that abstract concepts give us explanatory power. For example, in one of Karl Marx’s writings he talks about “the discovery of America” and how it gave impetus to the world market. That idea of Marx’s can only be used to explain one empirical event. However, if we can see what happened in more abstract terms, we can explain more than one situation. In this case we could substitute “geographic expansion” and the theory would have more explanatory power. The problem with abstract concepts is that they are indefinite, which is why definitions are so important.

Let’s use a common table as an example. Any specific table is there for everyone to see and touch. We can assess it using a standard of measurement. So, we can say, “That table is 48 by 24 inches.” (Of course, it changes to 121.92 by 60.96 centimeters if we use the metric system.) But a definition of table must be general enough to be used to classify all tables, not just this one. Definitions describe ideas and concepts. How, then, do we know where the idea or category of table begins and ends? The only way to limit the idea of table is to specify it through a definition.

If I ask you to give me a definition for table, you might say something like, “A table is a wooden structure that has four legs.” But is that general enough? No. Don’t we call some metal things tables as well? And some things that count as tables have three rather than four legs. So, you might then say, “A table is a structure made out of any material that has three or more legs that has a flat surface upon which we can place objects.” That’s better, but is it good enough? Maybe, but this definition could also apply to chairs as well as tables. Obviously, we aren’t usually that concerned about the definition of table. We all know what a table is, at least within practical limits, which is all we’re really concerned with in everyday life. But I hope you can see the issue for critical thinking and theory: If all we have to build arguments and theory out of are concepts, then definitions become extremely important. They are the basic fodder for critical thinking and are the fundamental building blocks of theory and arguments.

Strong definitions will go beyond a simple description and will explain the conditions necessary for belonging to the concept/class being defined. We were working toward this kind of stipulative definition in our discussion of table. In our definitions, we want to fully explain the qualities that make something what it is and not something else. Merriam-Webster (2002) defines table as “a piece of furniture consisting of a smooth flat slab fixed on legs or other support and variously used (as for eating, writing, working, or playing games).” That strikes me as a fairly good definition. It’s general enough to include tables with three, four, six, or eight legs, yet specific enough to exclude other similar objects like chairs (tables are used
for “eating, writing, working, or playing games”)—the definition stipulates the necessary conditions for a thing to be considered a table.

Theories also need to explain the relationships among the concepts. Keep this in mind: Theoretical concepts do work and it's the relationships that explain how they work. There are at least two concerns in spelling out theoretical relationships. The first is the direction of the relationship. There are two basic possibilities, positive and negative. A relationship is positive if the concepts vary in the same direction (either both increase or both decrease); relationships are negative if they vary in opposite directions (if one increases, the other decreases). Let's use a simple example—education and occupation. The relationship between these two concepts is positive (at least, that’s your working hypothesis for being in school): Increasing years of education will produce higher-rated jobs for the individual. Notice that because the relationship is positive, it works the same in reverse: Lower years of education produce lower-rated jobs.

The second concern with relationships is more difficult: We need to explain the relationship. More years of education might equate to a better job, but how does that work? If you think about this a moment, you’ll see that the theoretical task just grew tremendously. What is it about education that would affect jobs in that way? How does this relationship work? Historically, it wasn’t always true that formal education and occupation were related. Why are they now? Many people in our society know that higher levels of education lead to better jobs, but most can't explain how that works. When you can do that, you're beginning to form authoritative opinions.

But theory can and should do more. Theory should inspire and give insight; it should make us see things we wouldn’t otherwise. For example, when Marx says that capitalism breeds its own gravediggers, we see something that isn’t possible when giving a technical explanation of the material dialectic. Or, when Durkheim says that the collective consciousness is so independent that it will often do things for its own amusement, our mind is captured in such a way that a technical explanation of social facts can’t match. The same is true with Habermas’ colonization of the lifeworld, or the idea that money is a pimp, or the notion of plastic sexuality, and many others. It’s important to see that this function of theory isn’t simply a matter of “turning a phrase.” These kinds of theoretical statements get at the essence—they help us see into the core of a social factor or process. Both functions of theory are important, but they can easily overshadow one another. Theory should thus explain how something works or came about as well as inspire us to insight.

One of the things I hope you take from this discussion is that your education in social and sociological theory isn’t insignificant. It is an intrinsic part of what we mean when we talk about modernity and democracy. Yet at the same time I’ve set up an ideal modernity. Through our journey together we’ll see that some of the ideals are substantiated in the theories we consider, but we’ll also see that many are challenged. Part I of the book presents theorists working in the early stages of modernity, and they have concerns (basically the same ones that Randall Collins notes as previously mentioned). Herbert Spencer is concerned about how complex modern societies can be integrated; Karl Marx, Chapter 3, is concerned with capitalism, initially seen as a
vehicle for equality; Max Weber, Chapter 4, is concerned about the effects modern rationality has on society and social relations; in Chapter 5, we’ll see that Émile Durkheim focuses on the cultural diversity modernity brings with it; George Herbert Mead and Georg Simmel, Chapter 6, are interested in how modern society affects the person; and in Chapter 7, we meet the challenges of gender and race to the modern social project. In Part II, we turn to theories coming out of twentieth-century modernity, a period of theory cumulation and schools of thought. And in Part III, we’ll consider the most contemporary theories, such as postmodernism, poststructuralism, theories of globalization, and identity politics. But to take this journey we have to start here, firmly grounded in modernity, its vision, and most importantly its way of knowing.

At the end of every chapter, I will be giving you exercises and projects. These activities are designed to help you understand and use the theories you’ve learned. The intent of this chapter is to provide you with a background for the rest of the book. I am thus keeping this toolbox brief. The most important things I want you to take away from this chapter are ideas that you can use to think through and analyze the theories that follow.

- Please define the following terms. Make your definitions as theoretically robust as possible (don’t be afraid to consult other sources). You want these definitions to work for you throughout the book: modernity, progress, empiricism, positivism, science, technical project, social project, democracy, theory, perspectives, theoretical definitions.

- Please answer the following questions:
  - Explain the projects of modernity and how science as a knowledge system fits in.
  - Describe the work of the first sociologists. What were their concerns? How do you think sociology fits into the projects of modernity?
  - Define theory. In your definition be certain to explain the purpose, building blocks, and goals of theory.
  - What are the three assumptions sociologists usually make? Describe each assumption and why it is important in the work of theory.