

els appeared to be contradictory—one described a dream utopia and the other a nightmare dystopia. B. F. Skinner was optimistic about the potential value of human scientific knowledge, but George Orwell warned of the dangers of bureaucratic and technological control. *Walden Two* implied that happiness was to be found in a society that was planned and controlled from the top by intellectuals, while *1984* hinted that emancipation could only come from the collective power of an ignorant and oppressed people working together.

Even though both books were obvious works of fiction, I often wondered if either one was an accurate picture of a future society. And by implication, which story was based on a more precise view of per-sonhood? Are we destined to live forever in a world of war, hunger, sickness, poverty, and social inequality, or is a better world possible? Can progress be made through planned collective intervention? What political system is most fair and just? Can science serve as a tool for emancipation? It was later, when I went to college, that I discovered that these very issues were the ones that were being addressed in the discipline of sociology.

### THE PROMISE OF SOCIOLOGY

This book is intended to serve as an introduction to sociological thinking. It is not, however, meant to be a comprehensive overview of the discipline. There are plenty of thick textbooks that serve this function well. Instead, my focus is on what I believe to be the defining concern of sociology, namely, *the relationship between our personal lives and the social forces that structure society*. This particular concern has been famously articulated by C. Wright Mills (1916–1962), one of the most influential American sociologists of the twentieth century. In describing what he called *The Sociological Imagination*, Mills argued that human liberation begins with understanding the relationship between “personal troubles” and “public issues.”<sup>9</sup> Unemployment, for example, is no doubt a personal trouble for the individual who can’t find a job. And if he or she were the only jobless person in the entire society, we might be justified in concluding that it is *only* a personal problem. But unemployment is never isolated. It follows a pattern and affects millions of people in an economy. In this sense it is a public issue and must be understood in terms of larger political and economic structures. The same can be said for many other personal troubles—divorce, illness,

and crime are all experienced as troubles in the context of one’s personal life, but each is also a matter of public concern at the level of “social structure.” And importantly, changes in personal life are often caused by structural changes—forces beyond the control of a single individual.

Once after giving an introductory lecture on sociology I was approached by an obviously anxious student who demanded to know if sociologists held to the belief that “society controls individual behavior.” When I answered “No,” the student looked relieved and said, “So individuals control their own future.” Again I answered “No.” Clearly frustrated, the student insisted on a straight answer. “It has to be one or the other; it can’t be both! Now which one is it?” Over the years I have found that many students approach sociology from a similar perspective. There is a tendency to believe that an understanding of the individual-society relationship boils down to a simple distinction: either our personal actions and choices shape our life or something called “society” is the master of our destiny. But this is a false choice that oversimplifies human behavior, much like the nonsense debate of “nature versus nurture” or “psychology versus biology.” The real world is more complicated. The answer to my student’s question is that we are both free to act on our choices *and*, at the same time, very powerful social forces shape us.

Karl Marx (1818–1883), one of the founders of sociology, put it best when he said, “[People] make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.”<sup>10</sup>

In other words, the decisions we make and the actions we choose to take are made under conditions that we inherit from generations that came before us. In this way, social forces rooted in the past shape our options in the present. As we will see in the following chapters, social forces come in many different shapes and sizes and affect us in ways that are very often undetectable. Some are found in culture, some in the economy, others impress upon us in the immediate situation, while still others are found deep in our psyche. All, however, have a history that originates with generations before us. The first step toward a better world is in identifying these forces and distinguishing between the good and the bad, those that limit our dignity and freedom from those that enhance cooperation and justice. The science of sociology can help us in this quest.



Political solutions cannot succeed if they are based on false assumptions, prejudice, and intolerance for diversity. Nor can they work if they are forced on us through political, economic, or military power. Reasonable and effective solutions must be arrived at democratically, aided by a social theory that has been tested using systematic observations and careful analysis. I do not believe a perfect world is possible, and sociology does not promise a utopia. There is no Walden Two in our future (and even if there were, it certainly wouldn't come to us through behaviorist psychology). But I do believe that progress toward a better society can be achieved. Working collectively we can avoid the Orwellian nightmare. Indeed, history is a testament to the triumph of democratic resistance. In the United States, for example, we have seen the abolition of slavery, women have achieved greater equality with men, child labor has been mostly eliminated, and civil rights have been extended to a greater number of people. On the international stage we have seen the defeat of the apartheid system of racial discrimination in South Africa, totalitarian regimes have collapsed in many nations, and the value of democracy is increasingly recognized. Still, immense challenges remain. As I write this, acts of genocide have left more than four hundred thousand dead and another one million homeless in Darfur, Africa. The United States continues to occupy Iraq and Afghanistan by military force, and the specters of global warming and nuclear war threaten the very survival of the planet.

Sociology alone cannot solve these public issues. But sociology can play a very important role. The promise of sociology is *enlightenment*—not religious or spiritual enlightenment, but intellectual enlightenment; where reason triumphs over myth, science over superstition, and democracy over political domination. The path to intellectual enlightenment is often a personal struggle that requires courage, the courage to confront long-held beliefs and traditions in a quest for truth. But if light is to triumph over darkness, we must be prepared to challenge comfortable ways of thinking, and we must never fear to examine new ideas—no matter how threatening. In the famous words of the great eighteenth-century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804),

Sapere aude!  
(Dare to know!)

## Chapter One

# Individualism

## *The Power of a Myth*

Man is the more vulnerable to self-destruction the more he is detached from any collectivity, that is to say, the more he lives as an egoist.

—Emile Durkheim<sup>1</sup>

When Theodore John Kaczynski was born on May 22, 1942, his parents, Turk and Wanda, were likely filled with joy and hope for their firstborn child. Growing up in the Chicago suburb of Evergreen Park, Ted gave his family every reason to be proud. His academic performance in elementary school was so advanced that he skipped the sixth grade. While in high school he was identified by teachers as a brilliant student, demonstrating superior skills in math and science. In a letter of recommendation to Harvard University, his high school guidance counselor wrote, "I believe Ted has one of the greatest contributions to make to society. He is reflective, sensitive, and deeply conscious of his responsibilities to society."<sup>2</sup> Most who knew him as an adolescent described Ted as being somewhat quiet and a bit shy. No one expected him to one day become one of the FBI's most wanted criminals.

By the age of twenty, Ted had graduated from Harvard and was enrolled in a doctoral program in mathematics at the University of Michigan where he worked as a teaching assistant. Students and faculty alike gave him positive evaluations, describing him as "one of the best students I have ever taught," "first rate," and "enormously impressive."