Preface

A preface generally tells the story of how a book came into being. This particular book is rooted in my previous work in macrosociology: notably, two earlier books in which I summarize the work of the big four in nineteenth-century sociology—Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—and of contemporary theorists who write in the tradition of these founders. In writing these books, I not only learned much about macrosociological theory, but I also began to appreciate the common ground among theorists. In the final chapter of the second book, Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems, I attempted to briefly sketch this common ground. This work represents a more systematic and fully developed synthesis.

I have always taught at small universities, where teachers and generalists are still valued, rather than empirical research and ever more detailed specialization, so the type of sociology I practice has largely fallen out of fashion. Consistent with other trends in the sociocultural system, the field of sociology has evolved into a broad collection of specialties with little common bond or shared vision. In graduate school, we learn a little about the founders (all of them macrosociologists, by the way) and a few broad theories (functionalism, conflict theory, exchange, symbolic interactionism—all seemingly contradicting each other), but we have little to do with macro theories throughout our subsequent careers, unless we specialize in social theory itself, in which case we often teach it as the history of the discipline rather than as its heart. What distinguishes a sociological study from other fields is the fact that almost all sociologists study some aspect of sociocultural systems and its impact on human behaviour. But in so doing, we usually do not root our studies in the broader sociocultural system or develop systematic connections to the other specialties within the disciplines. Sociologists who specialize in criminology, for example, do not often
read studies in medical sociology; even if they do, they will struggle to find common terminology, literature, or theory.

I believe it is imperative that sociologists return to our roots. Macro social theory is rooted in a shared world view. If you were originally drawn to sociology because you were interested in the origins of sociocultural systems, in how they maintain themselves through time and how and why they change, in what impact such systems have on human behaviour and beliefs, I believe you will find this book of value. As evolution does for biology, an explicit and shared world view offers an overall framework for understanding a discipline; it serves to define and organize a field, providing an initial guide to a new subject and informing us about what to look for, what is likely to be significant. Used as a program to guide social research, a paradigm can be systematically tested and developed, offering an agreed-upon and empirically based alternative vision to those offered by religion, ideology, or folk wisdom. Such a holistic world view or paradigm offers identity to its practitioners and order to its students; it could well be the most important gift we can give to our students.

Readers of this work will find that I have a passion for quotation, especially of the nineteenth-century founders of the discipline of sociology. The driving force behind these numerous quotations is my desire for accuracy. The extent to which textbook authors and practicing social scientists rely upon secondary sources characterizing the nineteenth-century social scientists is surprising; this reliance came home to me in my study of T. Robert Malthus’s *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798). The secondary literature on Malthus and his theories is replete with fundamental misunderstandings. With rare exceptions, authors who have summarized and critiqued Malthus’s theory have asserted that it was a theory of future population overshoot and collapse rather than a theory detailing the continuous checks on population growth and the consequences of those necessary checks for the entire sociocultural system.\(^1\) Even a cursory reading of the first few chapters of Malthus’s essay reveal that the standard interpretation is nonsense, yet it is rarely challenged and has yet to be corrected in much of the literature. I doubt that many
contemporary social scientists have read the original essay, or, if they have, the secondary literature has so completely biased their interpretations that they are reading into it what they expect to find. A similar situation exists with Marx, although it is compounded by the fact that almost fifty years of Cold War with the former Soviet Union has so biased the American mind toward Marx and his critique of capitalism that reading him at all is rather suspect. The labelling of people of the Left as “communists” or “Marxists” has a long history in the United States, peaking in the years after World Wars I and II. It appears the label is coming into fashion again: commentators and even some congressmen have recently used it on opponents.² Because serious errors have crept into the secondary literature, I think it imperative that we not simply allege that a theorist held one opinion or another (and then criticize the theorist for holding that opinion in the next paragraph) but rather root our allegations in actual quotations of that theorist’s work.

In this book, I quote extensively from Marx’s seminal work, volume 1 of *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. *Das Kapital* was originally published in German in 1867; the third German edition, published in 1883, was the source of the first English version (1887), translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling and edited by Friedrich Engels. It is from this first English translation, now referred to as volume 1 of *Capital*, that I quote fairly often in this book. I use this translation for several reasons: (1) the primary translator, Samuel Moore, was, for many years, a friend of both Marx and Engels, and Dr. Aveling, the secondary translator who was responsible for several chapters, was Marx’s son-in-law; (2) the translation was closely supervised and edited by Friedrich Engels, Marx’s long-time friend and collaborator; (3) this edition is widely available both online and in a relatively inexpensive e-book format, a boon to readers who wish to explore the text further; and (4) the Moore-Aveling translation is in the public domain, so I do not have to seek or pay for the rights to use extensive quotes. Although a translation is by definition a secondary source, given the extensive involvement of intimates of Marx (who were assisted by Eleanor, Marx’s youngest
daughter and Aveling’s wife) in this translation, I consider it to be authoritative.

One of my goals in writing this book is that it will serve as an introduction to both classical sociological thought and its style of expression, thus making the classics less intimidating. For this reason, I often quote the passage I am referring to in the narrative. Unfortunately, much of Marx’s prose can be overwhelming to the uninitiated, particularly in long and complex paragraphs (even in translation, he often seems to be writing in German). Therefore, for particularly complex passages, I put the quotation in an endnote rather than in the narrative. With quotations that are restricted for copyright reasons (and this includes translations of Durkheim and Weber, as well as work by contemporary social scientists), I characterize the authors’ writing and provide citations for the original material.

But my passion for quoting the early social scientists goes beyond simply documenting my characterizations of their writings or giving the reader a sense of the “tang and feel” of their writing (to borrow a phrase from C. Wright Mills). It is also a result of my desire to highlight the sociological insight of these remarkable theorists. Writing in essentially agrarian societies, these sociologists identified the major forces of stability and change in sociocultural systems and were thus able to foresee the immediate future development of those systems with astonishing accuracy. I am in complete agreement with C. Wright Mills when he wrote, “I believe that what may be called classic social analysis is a definable and usable set of traditions; that its essential feature is the concern with historical social structures; and that its problems are of direct relevance to urgent public issues and insistent human troubles” (1959, 21). The quotations that I use in this book amply demonstrate this assertion. This is not to say that nineteenth-century writings in the social sciences should be accepted uncritically. One can appreciate Malthus’s focus on population and its impact on other parts of the sociocultural system without accepting his attitudes toward birth control or the severe limitations he places on government action to alleviate the plight of the poor. One can accept the accuracy of Marx’s analysis on the role of capital
in society without his predictions of a socialist revolution that will solve many of its contradictions. One can accept Weber’s analysis of bureaucracy without completely accepting his pessimism toward the future. Still, the nineteenth-century social theorists provide a solid foundation upon which contemporary sociologists can stand.

Finally, I am proud that Athabasca University Press is an open-source press; in addition to publishing this book in hard copy and in e-book format, the press will make it available free to anyone with access to the Internet. This appeals greatly to my sense of community.

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