The System

Modes of production establish constraints with which humanity must come to terms, and the constraints of the industrial mode of production are peculiarly demanding. . . . Industrial production . . . confronts men with machines that embody “imperatives” if they are to be used at all, and these imperatives lead easily to the organization of work, of life, even of thought, in ways that accommodate men to machines rather than the much more difficult alternative. — ROBERT L. HEILBRONER

This chapter constitutes a materialist’s summary of the overall structure and dynamics of sociocultural systems. Almost all macrosociological theories worthy of the name are materialistic, systemic, and evolutionary. All place great emphasis on the centrality of either production or population—more often, both—on sociocultural evolution. All tend to focus upon changes in human groups and organizations in response to the intensification of population and production, and, in true systemic fashion, these theories go on to examine the reciprocal effects of these structural changes on other parts of the system. Finally, all see human nature as being strongly influenced, if not determined, by the prevailing social structure. It is with this last point that we begin.
Karl Marx perceived human nature to be highly flexible and very much subject to the society into which the individual was socialized. We are all creatures of our society, he maintained, though we are the creators of that society as well. Social human beings transform nature through work and, in the process, transform themselves. In Marx’s theory, therefore, individuals are simply “personifications” of their class; their behaviour and ideals are molded by their material class interests. According to Marx, people are not born either good or evil; rather, they are subject to the interests of the class system into which they are born. In the preface to the first edition of *Capital*, Marx ([1867] 1915, 15) writes: “To prevent possible misunderstanding, a word. I paint the capitalist and the landlord in no sense couleur de rose [rosy colours]. But here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class-interests. My stand-point, from which the evolution of the economic formation of society is viewed as a process of natural history, can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he socially remains, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them.” According to Marx, good and evil are the products of social institutions—in particular, social institutions rooted in the private ownership of the means of production.

Durkheim’s ([1893] 1997) view of human nature is equally reliant upon the influence of social institutions in determining that nature, but it is a much subtler view. As discussed in the previous chapter, for Durkheim, human beings are of two natures, the egoistic “will,” which is centred on the gratification of the individual’s needs and desires, and the socially internalized “collective conscience”: “There are in each of us, as we have said, two consciences: one which is common to our group in its entirety which, consequently, is not our-self, but society living and acting within us; the other, on the contrary, represents that in us which is personal and distinct, that which makes us an individual” (129–30). The “will” is similar to Freud’s
“id” and is very much focused upon the satisfaction of bodily wants and desires; the “collective conscience” is much like Freud’s “super-ego,” although Durkheim roots the collective conscience much more firmly in society. It is society, or the social groups into which the individual is integrated, that imparts meaning, values, and moral guidelines for behaviour. Only through strong integration into groups—that is, strong identification with groups based on powerful bonds of love and commitment—can individuals internalize these moral guidelines. Without this bond, the “will” is set loose upon the world, allowing individuals to freely exploit their fellow human beings. Furthermore, these bonds can only be formed through warm, human relationships, which in turn are only possible in small, intimate primary groups. In a society organized through secondary, bureaucratic organizations in which we spend growing amounts of time, the individual “will” is increasingly left without moral guidance and society necessarily becomes a collection of individuals without a moral centre. Durkheim ([1897] 1951, 208) argued that this lack of moral guidance on the will has devastating consequences for the individual: “If nothing external can restrain this capacity, it can only be a source of torment to itself. Unlimited desires are insatiable by definition and insatiability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity. Being unlimited, they cannot be quenched. Inextinguishable thirst is constantly renewed torture. It has been claimed, indeed, that human activity naturally aspires beyond assignable limits and sets itself unattainable goals. But how can such an undetermined state be any more reconciled with the conditions of mental life than with the demands of physical life?”

This necessary morality, according to Durkheim, cannot come from a rational source. It can only be imparted to individuals through a social bond capable of fully integrating them into the group to keep the will in check. Love and commitment to members of the group are critical in this integration; lacking this, individuals are left to their own devices and engage in activities that are often exploitive of others in order to satisfy the will. This conflict between our egoistic drive to satisfy our senses and appetites and our socially instilled
collective conscience is ongoing and can never be fully resolved. In fact, Durkheim claims, it must necessarily get worse as society evolves (cited in Meštrović [1988] 1993, 74).

Anthropologist Walter Goldschmidt (1990) argues that the human need for bonding with others has a biological basis. Citing empirical studies on primate and human infants, he concludes that affection from others is critical for both psychological and physical health. This need for affection, beginning in infancy, is the central mechanism in the socialization process through which the individual internalizes the values, norms, and belief systems of the group. In adult life, Goldschmidt writes, this need for affection from others is satisfied by acquiring social prestige within the group. Over and above the issue that Durkheim raises with regard to integrating individuals into the collective conscience, Goldschmidt writes of how this drive for prestige shapes overall behaviour:

As I am using the term here, it [prestige] is a quality a person has; a quality that is conferred upon him by others by virtue of his attributes, actions, competence, comportment and the like. It is not, of course, a finite quantity; one can have more or less of it; one can acquire some or lose a bit through performance or circumstances. In this definition, prestige adheres to the individual as a result of the evaluations made by the community, by his public; it does not inhere in the qualities or acts themselves. It is something the individual seeks, for having prestige conferred upon him serves his self-esteem, satisfies that need for positive affect that I see as so central an element in human sociality. Having achieved it by whatever means, an individual is most likely to want to advertise the fact, hence status symbols. (31–32; emphasis added)

While the need for prestige is universal, the qualities or actions that are given prestige vary between cultures or in the same culture over time. It is this need for social approval, or prestige, that keeps individuals committed to their community. Individuals pursue a “career,” Goldschmidt maintains, in an effort to satisfy both the
self (will) and the social expectations placed upon their behaviour: “The individual career is the lifetime pursuit of satisfactions, both physical and social. The central feature of a career is a person’s contribution to the production, protection and reproduction necessary for the community’s continued existence, but it includes other valued activities that help to define the self in the context of the existing social order” (3; emphasis added). Individuals continually strive to satisfy their egoistic drives while seeking to maintain or increase their allotted social prestige by contributing to the production, protection, reproduction, and continuance of the group and its values.

Materialists agree that human behaviour is strongly motivated by the satisfaction of these biological, psychological, and social drives, which include the need for food, shelter, sexual expression, love, affection, and social prestige. Rather than relying upon instinctual behaviour, the individual learns, through the socialization process, a range of socially acceptable and unacceptable behaviours in satisfying these drives. We meet our needs through interaction with others, through sociocultural systems. All human beings (and other primates) share these needs—they are universal. Socially approved ways of satisfying these needs, however, vary across societies and across subgroups within societies. The entire sociocultural system rests on the way in which a society exploits its environment to meet the biological, psychological, and social needs of its population. All members of a society are dependent on the satisfaction of these needs, at least at minimum levels, to sustain life. Therefore, a society’s population and production systems—which together determine the amount and types of resources required to sustain that system—are critical in understanding the entire sociocultural system.

**POPULATION AND PRODUCTION**

As Thomas Robert Malthus pointed out over two hundred years ago, our ability to produce children is far more powerful than our ability to produce sustenance for their survival. We therefore must
adapt our population size to the energy, particularly in the form of food, that we can extract from our environment. Whether consciously or not, individuals make decisions about how many children to have based on their calculation of the costs of having a child (food, clothing, child care, number of children already in the household, probabilities of survival, family wealth and income) and the benefits (possible labour contributions to the household, security in old age, and, most important in hyperindustrial societies, the affective bond between parent and child). To control their fertility, some (although few) individuals practice celibacy until they can afford children. But since the expression of sexuality is very much a part of our animal nature, celibacy is perhaps more widespread in societies and subcultures where religious or ideological reinforcement for this behaviour is strong. Individuals are more likely to control their fertility through non-procreative sexual behaviour or the use of contraception. Should children be conceived who cannot be adequately cared for, many societies practice abortion or infanticide. Failing that, there is malnutrition, disease, and neglect. While the preventive check of birth control is more effective and widely available today, the positive check of premature death is still very much with us.

While it is the individual—often in consultation with a partner—who makes the cost-benefit decision about whether and when to have children, the decision is affected by societal forces such as general economic conditions and the gradual establishment of norms in response to these conditions. For example, as Malthus pointed out over two hundred years ago, when a society is populated up to the level it can support at its accepted standard of living, the age of women at first marriage tends to be high. The cost of raising a child in such a fully populated society becomes higher: as food, clothing, and shelter becomes more expensive, the cost-benefit equation changes and people respond accordingly. In societies that are relatively underpopulated, such as the colonizing societies in the New World, the average age for women at first marriage tends to be considerably lower. Malthus (1798, 18) elaborates on these relationships:
If I find that at a certain period in ancient history, the encouragements to have a family were great, that early marriages were consequently very prevalent, and that few persons remained single, I should infer with certainty that population was rapidly increasing, but by no means that it was then actually very great, rather; indeed, the contrary, that it was then thin and that there was room and food for a much greater number. On the other hand, if I find that at this period the difficulties attending a family were very great, that, consequently, few early marriages took place, and that a great number of both sexes remained single, I infer with certainty that population was at a stand, and, probably, because the actual population was very great in proportion to the fertility of the land and that there was scarcely room and food for more.

Similar relationships exist for norms and values regarding sexuality. In underpopulated societies, one would expect severe restrictions on non-procreative sexual behaviours; in societies that are closer to full population level (given the existing relationships between production technology and the environment), we would expect less stringent norms regarding such behaviours as masturbation, oral sex, homosexuality, and other forms of non-procreative sex. Malthus again makes this very point in an oft-misunderstood passage on the double standard of premarital sexual behaviour for women. The origin of the “superior disgrace” attached to a “breach of chastity in the woman than in the man,” he writes, lies with population pressures (65–66). If a woman becomes pregnant and gives birth to a child without having the father’s support in raising that child, the burden falls not only on her but on the community of which she is a part. The paternity, of course, is not as easy to ascertain as the maternity: hence the “superior disgrace.” It is no accident that this “superior disgrace” is now rapidly diminishing, as are the prohibitions on birth control, abortion, and many non-procreative sexual practices, including gay relationships. It is not growing immorality, moral enlightenment, the death of God, the decline of religion, or gay political pressure alone that are causing the change in North America’s sexual morality. The sexual practices
listed above would not take hold in a society that was underpopulated; they would not gain widespread acceptance if they were not compatible with infrastructural conditions.

Consistent with intensification, humans have applied science and technology to bring greater conscious control over their decisions regarding reproduction with ever more efficient forms of birth control. In addition, consistent with bureaucratization and rationalization, governments have increasingly moved to explicitly affect the personal decisions of reproduction with tax incentives, educational programs, access to contraception information and technology, propaganda, and other pressures on individuals to either stimulate or dampen their decisions to reproduce. Similarly, social developments have paralleled industrialization in dampening the birth rate, some examples being the decline in infant mortality, the decline of agricultural labour, an educated workforce, child labour laws, increasing commodification and consumerism, and the establishment of government social security. It is all a matter of individual cost-benefit decisions: change this calculation—lessen the costs of child rearing or increase the benefits—and population level will rise; increase the costs or lower the benefits and population level will slowly decline. And these individual cost-benefit decisions are dependent upon the relation of the sociocultural system to its environment.

Another mechanism by which a sociocultural system regulates the amount and type of energy needed from its environment is the mode of production—technologies that extract raw materials and energy from the environment and fashion them into useful human products. These technologies consist of the capital machinery we commonly envision—dynamos, factories, production lines, farm machinery, and computers, as well as chemicals and biotechnologies. The mode of production also includes the division of labour necessary to employ these technologies and to research and develop new technologies so as to intensify production processes further, to offset resource depletion, to manage the resulting pollution, and to provide for growth in production per capita.
In the past, the growth or intensification of production processes was a matter of happenstance: accidental discovery driven by necessity, contact with other societies, or individual invention or discovery. Early industrial technological inventions such as the steam engine, for example, were largely the products of mechanics and tinkerers. As industrial society matured, however, the process of intensification became more deliberate and rationalized, stimulated by governments in an effort to secure vibrant national economies or by corporations seeking to maximize their profitability. Research and development became institutionalized, increasingly employing science and engineering to develop new productive technologies or to improve the productivity of existing technologies and refine the division of labour. Nation-states also stimulated technological development in order to create war machines of unparalleled scope and power. Using such mechanisms as grants to industry, tax incentives, investing in infrastructure (in terms of railroads, mass transit, highways, electrical grids, and the like), subsidies, and direct sponsorship of basic scientific research, governments seek to bring to bear rational means to intensify production processes.

As production and population continue to intensify throughout the world-system of societies, we are experiencing a growing depletion of resources (characterized by rising energy and commodity prices) and pollution. Government and non-governmental agencies alike point to a growing concern about population control, particularly in the Global South, where the direct impact of overpopulation in a particular region is readily apparent by signs of malnutrition, starvation, and disease. Some success in controlling world population growth has been achieved, and if present trends continue, population growth will continue to slow, with levels projected to reach some ten billion people by the end of this century. But as production processes continue to intensify around the world—a more serious issue for core countries than in the Global South—the demands on the environment will surely continue to increase, and the consumer lifestyles recently or soon to be attained will become ever more difficult to maintain for vast numbers of people.
STRUCTURED INEQUALITY

In this work, I have devoted several chapters to detailing the changes in social structure caused by the growth of population, ever more powerful technologies, and an increasingly detailed division of labour. I have written about the rise of both public and private bureaucracies and their effects on political and economic freedom, as well as their tendency toward irrational actions. These bureaucracies have grown in order to coordinate and control the actions (and thoughts) of huge numbers of people, as well as production and distribution processes that continue to grow in complexity. We then turned to the rise of the state and capitalism and their symbiotic relationship with one another through their co-evolution. Not only are these two secondary group structures brought into being by intensification of population and production, but they also serve to stimulate further intensification. Finally, we explored the impact that the growth of the state and the corporation has on primary group functions and the importance of these groups in the lives of their members. As governments and corporations expand and centralize their coordination and control over production and distribution processes, primary groups such as kinship and community lose important productive and distribution functions, become more fragile, and begin to break down; as a result, they become less important in enculturating the individual. Without significant integration into these primary groups, individuals do not fully internalize the moral guidance necessary for social behaviour, and government and corporations rely more and more upon external rules and manipulation to maintain order. This external regulation has grown in efficiency in recent times through “advances” in the techniques and technology of surveillance, propaganda, and bureaucratic management. Implements of war and force always undergird the state; employment, salary, and promotion provide the foundation for the power of the corporation over its employees. But both the state and the corporation—as well as political parties, interest groups, and not-for-profit organizations—use ever more pervasive media, propaganda, distraction, and spin to influence the masses as well.
In this, the final chapter, I discuss the inequality that exists in all sociocultural systems, although the degree of inequality varies greatly between societies and, through time, within individual societies. Theories of inequality have been a constant feature of macrosocial theory. In 1966, Gerhard Lenski authored a theory of the evolution of inequality that sets the stage for my discussion. For Lenski, human nature closely mirrors Durkheim’s conception of duality. According to Lenski, most human actions are, at base, motivated by self-interest or the interest of partisan groups (kinship, community) in which we are embedded. Because individuals are compelled to co-operate with others for both survival and the satisfaction of the vast majority of human needs and desires, they are bound together in “antagonistic co-operation.” Since valuable goods and services are in short supply, there is competition for scarce resources in every human society. Humans, however, are unequally endowed by nature and by their society to carry on this struggle for resources. Inequality is the outcome of this tension between the need for co-operation and the more narrowly defined self-interest of elites.

According to Lenski (1966), the social structure distributes the goods and services produced by a society on the basis of both need and power. Through enlightened self-interest on the part of all, there is a fairly equitable distribution of basic goods and services to productive classes. This enlightened self-interest is the widespread knowledge that some distribution of basic goods and services to productive classes is essential for the survival and continued productivity of those classes. Indeed, this distribution will ensure the prosperity of the elite themselves. However, Lenski hypothesizes that any surplus over and above the basic goods and services necessary to keep productive classes alive and producing will be distributed on the basis of economic and political power. Therefore, in the simplest societies, which have little technology or division of labour, one would expect little surplus and, consequently, little inequality (46). And, of course, this is what we find in hunting-and-gathering societies, which are generally the most egalitarian societies on earth.
As technology and the division of labour increases, Lenski predicts, a significant portion of the new goods will go to feed a growing population but a larger surplus of goods will also be produced; thus, an increasing portion of goods and services will be distributed on the basis of economic or political power (46). In this manner, Lenski arrives at the following causal chain: the more powerful the technology and the more detailed the division of labour, the greater the surplus of goods and services produced; the greater the surplus, the more goods and services will be distributed on the basis of power. To put it in slightly different terms, the social evolutionary process leads to greater inequality.

Of course, Lenski is no single-cause theorist. He is fully aware that there are other factors that will influence the amount of inequality within sociocultural systems. For example, he sees the environment as a significant factor in the productivity of any society. Specifically, a society with access to significant natural resources—say, oil—will achieve greater surpluses and consequently will experience greater inequality. Lenski posits structural factors that may serve to mitigate the degree of inequality within a society—constitutional government, military participation rates, and labour unions, for instance—but he asserts that the relationship between the amount of surplus and inequality will hold throughout the evolutionary process. So the question is, Has the degree of inequality increased over the course of sociocultural evolution?

Lenski tests his theory by examining the ethnographies and histories of societies from the hunting-and-gathering era through the technological societies of mid-twentieth century United States and the Soviet Union. He discovers increasing levels of inequality throughout most of the evolutionary process, finding each successive mode of production producing larger surpluses and, consequently, increasing levels of inequality between those at the top of the stratified system and those at the bottom. This holds from hunting-and-gathering, to simple horticulture, to advanced horticulture, to agrarian, and right through to early industrial societies. Each successive society produces greater gaps between the incomes
of those who have accumulated wealth and power and those who are subject to their rule. This holds true within societal types as well: for example, increases in the productivity of agrarian societies lead to greater inequality. Lenski finds that inequality came to its height in early industrial societies, with the wealthiest classes far removed from the poorest within these societies. But he also finds a reversal of this evolutionary trend, with inequality lessening significantly as industrial societies mature.

In late agrarian societies, a tremendous amount of wealth and power was concentrated at the top of the stratified system. In fact, Lenski estimates that up to 50 percent of all the income of agrarian societies was collected by the top 1 or 2 percent of the population. The main instrument of elite power in agrarian societies was the state, which was seen as the private property of the rulers and the small governing class. This perception allowed them to take the economic surplus from the lower classes. In contrast, Lenski (1966, 309–10) estimates that in 1966 the top 2.3 percent of the American pyramid collected about 15.5 percent of all the income on an annual basis, a far cry from the 50 percent of agrarian elites.

Lenski (1966, 308–25) attributes the lessening of income inequality in mature industrial societies to several factors. First, along with the maturation of an industrial society comes the necessity for a large number of administrative, professional, and technical workers in order to staff and coordinate the complex technologies, vast numbers of people, proliferation of organizations, and increasingly complex culture. Because of their technical knowledge, expertise, and seeming indispensability, upper administrators, technical specialists, and highly skilled labourers are allocated a larger share of the surplus. Given the magnitude and rapidity of the increase in productivity, elites are able to maximize their income even while granting some concessions to the workforce. “In an expanding economy, an elite can make economic concessions in relative terms without necessarily suffering any loss in absolute terms. In fact, if the concessions are not too large, and the rate of the economy’s growth is great enough, relative losses can even be accompanied by substantial absolute
gains” (314). A second factor lessening inequality is the difference in production and population dynamics in mature industrial societies from those of earlier, more traditional societies. In the latter, increases in productivity were accompanied by increases in population; children were used in the production process in that they could work in the fields or herd animals at a very early age. Mature industrial societies break the link between production and population, thus allowing a greater share of the surplus to go to the lower classes.4 As Lenski explains,

For the first time in history, mankind has found a safe, simple, and effective means of controlling population growth. In societies where these have been most widely used, the rate of population growth has been slowed to the point where real and substantial gains in per capita income have been achieved in a fairly short time, thus reducing the intensity of the competitive pressure. Now, for almost the first time in centuries, the lower classes are able to bargain for wages in markets no longer perennially glutted with labor. This development has almost certainly contributed to the decline in inequality. (315–16)

A final factor behind the lessening of inequality, Lenski posits, is the rise of organizations and ideologies that advocate more economic equality, such as labour unions, socialist parties in Europe, and the liberal ideologies behind the establishment of the welfare state in the United States and Canada. With the rise of representative democracy and universal suffrage, Lenski suggests, the state is no longer the exclusive agent of the elite; other interest groups use the state to moderate the rule of the elite. Consequently, a greater share of the surplus of advanced industrial society is allocated to the lower classes in an attempt to satisfy their demands and reduce class hostilities.

However, there are several qualifications regarding Lenski’s findings. First, he was writing in the early 1960s, when income inequality in the United States and other Western countries was demonstrably at historic lows. Suppose the lessening of income inequality
was but a short-term reversal of a long-term evolutionary trend? Second, Lenski’s inclusion of the former Soviet Union in his data flattens the income inequality. At the time, some of the country’s income data was seriously misleading. The old Soviet Union had, for example, devised a dual system of currency in which the rubles earned by Party leaders were far more valuable than those earned by the average citizen; these “golden rubles” could be used at stores open only to Party members that sold foreign goods of superior quality. Third, Lenski was comparing income inequality rather than inequality in wealth. While the distribution of income would certainly be most sensitive to changes in the factors that Lenski cites above—an ever more specialized division of labour, changes in population-production dynamics, and the rise of representative democracy and liberal ideologies—the distribution of wealth might be far more resistant to such influences. How has income inequality fared since Lenski tested his hypothesis?

Since Lenski originally tested his hypothesis, the share of income taken by the elite at the top of the income hierarchy has increased dramatically in the United States by almost every measure. The top 1 percent of wage earners in the United States, according to economist Joseph Stiglitz, now earn nearly 25 percent of the nation’s income. This represents a significant increase over Lenski’s estimate of 15.5 percent of all income earned by the top 2.3 percent of all income earners (1966, 309–10). Stiglitz reports that the top 1 percent have seen their incomes rise 18 percent in the past decade, while the incomes of those in the middle and lower classes have actually declined. All of the income growth in recent decades has gone to those at the top: the corporate executives, the financiers, and the speculators. What accounts for this increasing concentration of income? While many factors have been at play, Stiglitz identifies the main culprit: “The top 1 percent want it that way.” Stiglitz points to tax policies, lax enforcement of anti-trust laws, manipulation of the financial system (brought on by deregulation and little enforcement of the rules that remained), government bailouts of financial institutions, and other changes to the system.
Jacob Hacker and Paul Pierson (2010) document the steady rise of inequality in the United States, beginning in the late 1970s, and relate this rise directly to changes in the relationship between government and corporate interests: “Government actually has enormous power to affect the distribution of ‘market income,’ that is, earnings before government taxes and benefits take effect. Think about laws governing unions; the minimum wage; regulations of corporate governance; rules for financial markets, including the management of high-stakes economic ventures; and so on. Government rules make the market, and they powerfully shape how, and in whose interests, it operates” (44). As we have seen in previous chapters, laissez-faire capitalism has always been more of an ideology than a reality; states have always set the conditions of markets, and the conditions set in the US marketplace have changed dramatically in the past thirty years in ways strongly favouring the elite. This is most apparent in how the US government has treated unions and the social safety net, and in its failure to effectively regulate executive pay and financial markets (56). Another way in which government affects the distribution of income is through the process of drift. “It is the passive-aggressive form of politics, the No Deal rather than the New Deal,” write Hacker and Pierson (2010, 53). “Yet it is not the same as simple inaction. Rather, drift has two stages. First, large economic and social transformations outflank or erode existing policies, diminishing their role in American life. Then, political leaders fail to update policies, even when there are viable options, because they face pressure from powerful interests exploiting opportunities for political obstruction.” Second, drift is made easier in the American system by the traditional system of checks and balances among the branches of the federal government: executive or legislative action intended to address new problems—banking reform, environmental controls, campaign finance reform, health care reform—is often stymied by another branch. This has become easier still with the expanded use of the Senate filibuster, which now requires a supermajority of sixty votes for any major policy initiative (53). A third way in which government facilitates drift is, of course, through destroying...
the progressivity of the tax system by reducing the rates of those at the top, particularly at the very top (51).

How has this extreme inequality happened in a society that is supposedly democratic, one in which the “have-it-alls” are clearly outnumbered and could easily be outvoted? Hacker and Pierson (2010, 104) point to the same phenomenon that we have emphasized in previous chapters, namely, bureaucratic organization:

Organizations have formidable advantages, and modern life is unimaginable in their absence. They can marshal vastly greater resources than can any individual. Organizations permit specialization and thus the development of expertise—a critical advantage in a world of staggering and ever-increasing complexity. They allow many different kinds of talent to be combined and directed toward some big task. They can operate simultaneously in many different arenas. Perhaps most important, they are durable, even relentless, where individuals are flighty and, of course, mortal. Organizations can learn from experience. They can sustain a focus for decades if need be: watching, waiting, planning, and then seizing opportunity when the time is right.

Citizens have much competing for their attention, and politics and social issues are not often a high priority; a substantial number are apathetic and do not vote at all, and, perhaps worse, many are “low-information voters” who are easily swayed by advertisements, political propaganda, and other forms of manipulation. Even when aroused and focused, the attention of voters and the press often wanders, while organized interests press on. Hacker and Pierson (2010) offer an example of this with regard to the Tax Reform Act of 1986, which sharply reduced tax breaks for the wealthy while lowering tax rates for the majority of Americans. The reform was widely hailed as a triumph of the people over special interests. But it turns out the struggle over the Reform Act was just the initial battle. “Year after year, out of the spotlight, they [special interests] succeeded in adding back loopholes—one unnoticed provision at a time. They could do
so not because public opinion had drifted rightward (it hadn’t), but because they were organized and their opponents were not. Backed by organizations, they pushed politicians to respond to their concerns. And nobody pushed back” (107).

Stiglitz proposes that the upper class has lost the notion that their long-term economic fate is tied to that of the rest of their society: “The top 1 percent have the best houses, the best education, the best doctors, and the best lifestyles, but there is one thing that money doesn’t seem to have bought: an understanding that their fate is bound up with how the other 99 percent live. Throughout history, this is something that the top 1 percent eventually do learn. Too late.” This appears to parallel a phenomenon noted by sociologists when discussing rising inequality in earlier societies. Patrick Nolan and Gerhard Lenski (2011, 145–46), for example, reason that rising inequality among chiefdoms was largely due to the different life experiences and diverging family lines of chiefs, which gradually became separate from those of their subjects. Thus, subjects came to be viewed as less than human and could be exploited with little thought or guilt on the part of the elite, a process that reached its apex in late agrarian societies, where serfs and slaves were treated as property.

The separation of the elite from the masses may be a reoccurring process in sociocultural systems that is again coming to a head in hyperindustrial societies. The division of labour leads to a division in lifestyles. Increasingly, the wealthy live in gated communities, go to separate schools, and have their own security, lifestyle, and increasingly separate values. Globalization (encouraged by technological changes in transportation and communication) could well be accelerating the process; not only does it provide opportunities for great wealth, but it also breaks the economic tie between the elite and the local economy. Joel Bakan (2004, 22) explains:

By leveraging their freedom from the bonds of location, corporations could now dictate the economic policies of governments.

As Clive Allen, a vice president at Nortel Networks, a leading
Canadian high-tech company, explained, companies “owe no allegiance to Canada. . . . Just because we [Nortel Networks] were born there doesn’t mean we’ll remain there. . . . The place has to remain attractive for us to be interested in staying there.” To remain attractive, whether to keep investment within their jurisdictions or to lure new investment to them, governments would now have to compete among themselves to persuade corporations that they provided the most business-friendly policies. A resulting “battle to the bottom” would see them ratchet down regulatory regimes—particularly those that protected workers and the environment—reduce taxes, and roll back social programs, often with reckless disregard for the consequences.

No longer is it necessary for the elites’ home nation-states to prosper economically in order for their enterprises to do well; now it makes economic sense in both the short and (seemingly) long term to maximize profit at the expense of all around (and not around) you.

But it is not simply the top 1 percent who have benefited the most from the hyperindustrial economy. In the United States, the top one-fifth (20 percent) with the highest income now control over 50 percent of all the nation’s income, levels comparable to the top 2 percent of agrarian elites (Phillips 2002, 129). The fact that industrial society appears to spread the bulk of the income to a broader segment of the population could be attributed to the need for highly skilled executives, a large class of professionals, and a significant number of technical specialists to manage the complexity of the industrial-capitalist state and to more efficiently appropriate the massive surplus produced by all. But this is not necessarily cause for widespread jubilation. The fact that the bulk of the nation’s income goes to the top 20 percent as opposed to the top 2 percent would not materially affect 80 percent of the population.

Inequality in the distribution of wealth, as expected, is many times greater in US society than the inequality in income and has been growing in recent decades. The top 1 percent of the wealthiest households controlled 34.4 percent of the wealth when Lenski was
writing in 1965. Their share of the nation’s wealth dropped precipitously in the 1970s, falling as low as 20 percent during the nation’s bicentennial, but it began to climb again in the 1980s. By the early years of this century, it had climbed to slightly over 40 percent of the wealth of the nation! This is higher than at any other time in the twentieth century save 1929, the eve of the Great Depression (Phillips 2002, 123). “Wealth begets power, which begets more wealth,” writes Stiglitz. He elaborates:

The Supreme Court, in its recent *Citizens United* case, has enshrined the right of corporations to buy government, by removing limitations on campaign spending. The personal and the political are today in perfect alignment. Virtually all U.S. senators, and most of the representatives in the House, are members of the top 1 percent when they arrive, are kept in office by money from the top 1 percent, and know that if they serve the top 1 percent well they will be rewarded by the top 1 percent when they leave office. By and large, the key executive-branch policymakers on trade and economic policy also come from the top 1 percent. When pharmaceutical companies receive a trillion-dollar gift—through legislation prohibiting the government, the largest buyer of drugs, from bargaining over price—it should not come as cause for wonder. It should not make jaws drop that a tax bill cannot emerge from Congress unless big tax cuts are put in place for the wealthy. Given the power of the top 1 percent, this is the way you would expect the system to work.

A slogan from the Occupy movement of 2011 captures the problem: “The system isn’t broken, it’s fixed.” Given the recent trends since Lenski tested his original hypothesis and the fact that wealth indeed begets wealth, it appears that despite short-term reversals, an increase in inequality over the course of social evolution is still a viable hypothesis. However, it need not be so. Hacker and Pierson (2010, 52, 68–69) point out that Canada expanded its social safety net to lessen inequality and has thus far largely resisted the efforts of
financial institutions to rewrite regulatory rules; the country has thus been spared both hyper-inequality and the worst of the resulting global financial meltdown. Resistance is not futile, but it must be organized and sustained (305).

Hacker and Pierson point to an oscillation in American history between long periods of drift in which inequality gradually rises, followed by short bursts of reform and then a return to drift (83). If, indeed, history is a guide, we can expect continued struggle between the haves and the have-nots. Many look to our era and conclude that change will certainly come, for social justice is the only basis for lasting peace. As John F. Kennedy said: “Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.” The struggle of elites who seek to maintain or increase their privilege and those seeking a broader-based social justice should long remain one of the engines of sociocultural evolution.

But as C. Wright Mills (1959, 153–54) pointed out, history is not always the most reliable guide:

We can examine trends in an effort to answer the question ‘where are we going?’—and that is what social scientists are often trying to do. In doing so, we are trying to study history rather than to retreat into it, to pay attention to contemporary trends without being “merely journalistic,” to gauge the future of these trends without being merely prophetic. All this is hard to do. We must remember that we are dealing with historical materials; that they do change very rapidly; that there are countertrends. And that we have always to balance the immediacy of the knife-edge present with the generality needed to bring out the meaning of specific trends for the period as a whole.

At the same time, I admit to some uneasiness regarding the possibilities of reform, at least in the short term. I am haunted by the notion that social and technological methods of manipulation, monitoring, and control of individual behaviour now afforded to organized interests are simply too strong to overcome, that the 99 percent—or the
80 percent who are most exploited—are too disorganized and powerless for reform to be successful or revolution feasible. While recent deregulation and globalization have largely gutted democratic control of capital, it is not the case that state power has been dramatically lessened; rather, it has been fused with the interests of capital. Public and private bureaucracies now confront the individual as a juggernaut increasingly serving the interests of the few at the expense of the many. The “iron cage” is closing, and it will not be easy to dismantle or escape as long as its material foundations remain intact. The human struggle will be long and hard, and the likelihood of success is not assured. But this is only one possible future among many, a vision that, while rooted in the preceding analysis, is strongly influenced by my values and fears.

**CULTURAL SUPERSTRUCTURE**

Of all the concepts in sociology, Weber’s concept of rationalization is perhaps the most encompassing. It can be defined as the application of observation and logic—the method and substance of science—to master the natural, social, and cultural environments. When applied to mastery of the natural environment, rationalization manifests itself through technology, the detailed division of labour, and increasing conscious-technical control over reproduction. When applied to the social environment, it is expressed in the bureaucratization of state, corporate, and not-for-profit enterprises at the expense of more informal kinship- or community-based organizations. When applied to culture, rationalization is characterized by the increasing dominance of behaviour motivated by goal-oriented rational thought over behaviour guided by tradition, values, and emotions. As a general concept, rationalization can encapsulate the entire character of modern society, integrating such concepts as the division of labour, technological development, intensification, urbanization, anomie, bureaucracy, capitalism, commodification, secularization, and scientification as specific examples of this universal concept. Even alienation can be
interpreted as a reaction against this process, whereby the individual
does not recognize the full self (values, emotions, traditions) in his or
her work, community, and fellow human beings.

Rationalization serves to integrate the disparate parts of the
system; intensification of the infrastructure causes bureaucratiza-
tion of the structure, thus promoting rationalization of the cultural
superstructure of the system. Superstructural rationalization then
promotes further bureaucratization of structure, both of which fur-
ther promote the intensification process. As stated throughout this
work, because life itself is based on material factors, all sociocul-
tural life must be responsive to its needs. But this does not mean that
structural and cultural elements are without influence. Indeed, they
strongly influence the direction and speed of sociocultural evolution.

**SUMMARY**

All sociocultural systems share a universal structure. All societies are
constrained by their environment; societies adapt to their environ-
ments through population and production technology and practices
(infrastructures). All human societies consist of human groups, which
exist on a continuum from primary to secondary, and have a cul-
tural superstructure consisting of ideas, ideologies, values, beliefs,
behavioural norms, and a storehouse of folklore, myth, and empirical
knowledge. Individual members of a society internalize the broader
cultural superstructure in varying degrees, largely depending upon
the extent of the division of labour and the resulting heterogeneity
of the system.

The dynamics of this universal system begin with the intensi-
fication of the infrastructure. This intensification, or growth in
population and production, has a direct impact upon the physical
environment in terms of depletion and pollution. In addition, the
intensification process affects social structure by causing the growth
of secondary organizations and bureaucracy. More people and more
complex production processes necessarily promote the enlargement
and centralization of capital and the state, which in turn provide further stimulus for infrastructural intensification. As secondary organizations grow in size and scope, primary groups based on kinship, community, and informal friendship connections lose many of their former functions; consequently, the social bonds within these groups weaken. The growth of public and private bureaucracies is, of course, counter to democratic control; it also leads to considerable irrationality on the part of states and corporations.

Finally, the knowledge base component of the cultural superstructure becomes broader, deeper, and more reflective of empirical reality with experience, discovery, and contact with other sociocultural systems. Intensification and bureaucratization cause the rationalization of the cultural superstructure, which in turn plays a prominent role in reinforcing, dampening, or extinguishing sociocultural change. This rationalization has consequences not only for sociocultural systems but also for the individual members of the society. Goal-oriented rational thought becomes the basis for our behaviour, while the role of behaviour based on tradition, values, or emotions diminishes in our lives. It is indeed a sociocultural system, with interrelated components that are constantly adapting to changes in other components as well as to the system as a whole.

These are the common elements among the various macro-level theories. These common elements, I maintain, make up the principles of macrosociology, which in turn form a framework for the complex web of interrelationships that make up sociocultural systems. Strongly rooted in the specific theories of the founders of the discipline, as well as in contemporary theory and empirical findings, these macrosociological principles constitute a view of the world that renders it intelligible.

Social reality is indeed so complex that we cannot begin to grasp it without such a world view, one that points us to key relationships within sociocultural systems. Basic principles of sociocultural organization are needed that tell the observer what to look for in order to explain social stability and change over time and how changes in the sociocultural structure affect human behaviour. For many,
these basic principles are provided by ideology, religion, or an often contradictory amalgamation of folk wisdom and unexamined prejudice. The division of labour has been responsible for some vastly different human experiences, which have in turn generated ideas and ideologies that must be encompassed by the cultural superstructure. In modern hyperindustrial societies, the sheer size and heterogeneity of the knowledge base makes it impossible for either individuals or subcultures to internalize all the elements of the cultural superstructure. In addition, some individuals and groups have actively developed countercultural images that oppose the dominant superstructural framework by providing an alternative map of reality—of the natural world, the social world, or both. In the absence of an empirically based world view capable of organizing our experience, popular understanding becomes confused and efforts at reform chaotic, to the point where the principles of democracy are subverted. Macrosociology synthesizes a diverse array of observed evidence and theory into a coherent and comprehensive explanatory system. This system is flexible enough so that it can be adjusted as new evidence arises, thus offering a framework to practitioners and students alike in understanding and navigating the social world.