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HOW IS SOCIOLOGY POSSIBLE?

I adapt my chapter title from an essay by Georg Simmel titled "How is Society Possible?" In that essay and others he incorporated into *Sociology: Studies of the Forms of Societalization* (1908), Simmel defined the basic questions he believed sociologists should address. Chief among them he placed the question of how society is possible, for sociological thinking begins with a view of society as something more than an aggregate of individuals or a synonym for nation, city, village, or parish. All sociologists study society as such; that phenomenon is their common focus, though they differ over what they see when they look at it. Sociology, therefore, involves both *a* sociological viewpoint—an angle of vision from which society appears as an object to know—and sociological viewpoint*s*—the perspectives of individual theorists who notice different features of the object. However divergent the latter views may be, they all devolve from the former position. It is my purpose in this chapter to show how this particular viewpoint developed into the discipline of sociology. First, I establish that a preoccupation with defining society as such is common to the five sociologists I term "founders." My account elides but does not ignore differences among them; describing their common viewpoint necessarily entails some delineation of their individual views. I then examine their efforts to devise suitable methods for studying their new object and to interest others in the investigation. I thus identify two of the three factors—a particular view of society and a determination to study it—that make sociology possible. I address the third factor—the availability of institutional space for the study—in the next chapter.

Society as Object and Being

The earliest definitions of society represent it as an object (Durkheim) or being (Tönnies) in its own right: "Society is not the mere sum of individuals; . . . the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics" (Durkheim,

Rules 129). Durkheim assigned these associations a "real" status because they exist, in effect, independently of the individuals who form them. As he elaborated, "when I perform my duties as a brother, a husband or a citizen and carry out the commitments I have entered into, I fulfill obligations which are defined in law and custom and which are external to myself and my actions" (*Rules* 50). This super-individual system of relations influences people's actions and attitudes whether they perform their duties by unselfconsciously imitating others or by deliberately following precepts they have learned. It even influences people who choose to violate its expectations, for it structures the nature of their rebellion (50–51). For Durkheim, sociological inquiry should identify these "social facts," these "ways[s] of acting . . . capable of exerting over the individual an external constraint" (59), and study their functions and causes (123). Tönnies placed even greater emphasis on the super-individual reality of society, which he attributed to a will to be together (*On Sociology* 4). Individual wills tend toward relationship; together, they constitute "social entities" (8). Tönnies' characterization of relationships as living beings is deliberate, for he saw them as "autonomous" conditions that exhibit lives and wills of their own (6). He argued that sociology must study both the observable features of relationships and the "subjective" or will-driven force animating them (8).

Durkheim and Tönnies seem to afford society an ontological status that it cannot possibly have. Their social "realism" often embarrassed their immediate successors, but more recent commentators recognize their statements as figurative rather than literal. On one level, these claims should be understood as heuristic devices to make the concept of society available for analysis. At another level, they show that sociology challenges any simple equation between reality and physical existence. The intangible *does* have tangible effects and therefore should not be considered only subjective, spiritual, or illusory. According to one revaluation, Durkheim's sociology corrects all one-sidedly objective or subjective hypotheses about human experience by supplying a Schopenhaurian theory of society as "representation" (Mestrovic 3–5, 17–18). Defending Durkheim from the charge of social realism, Mestrovic counters that Durkheim located society between physical and mental provinces. The symbols, rituals, and mores that characterize a social group are the accessible forms of its collective ideas, beliefs, and values. Social existence thus gives people access to an aspect of experience that is inconceivable through sensation and unrealizable through reason (Mestrovic 40–50). A consonant location on an intersubjective plane informs Tönnies' personification of the social being that incorporates individual wills. We might conclude that these

founders defined society as an immaterial object and gave sociology the task of analyzing that paradox.

Not only did Tönnies and Durkheim conceive of society as itself identifiable, they regarded it as prior to individuals.[1] For them, society is part of the natural order and therefore cannot begin in an individuated state that becomes gradually collective, for such a pattern would be unnatural. In nature, organisms become gradually more complex and differentiated. Both posited a "perfect unity of human wills as an original or natural condition" (Tönnies, *Community* 37) that gradually became more individuated. In the original state, the concept of the individual did not exist. Individuals existed, of course; people are biologically separate beings. During the earliest years of their history, however, people identified completely with the extended family group that constituted society; they did not think of themselves as beings with their own ideas and interests that might separate them from others (Tönnies, *Community* 37–63; Durkheim, *Labor* 126–42, *Rules* 143–44). This point should remind Romanticists of one of the most explosive statements to have been made in recent scholarship on the poets—Liu's assertion that "there is no nature" (38). The argument that nature has no existence except as a politically constructed generalization about trees, rocks, and streams is comparable to an argument that society has no existence except as an interested generalization about individuals. A sociological view inverts that argument. Developing this point in Chapters Three and Four, I address ways in which Wordsworth and Coleridge recognized the priority of society as they recognized the priority of nature.

As I show in more detail in Chapter Four, Tönnies described the early state of society as an idyllic community in which concord reigns: people "love and adjust to one another"; they "speak and think along similar lines"; they have mutual understanding as they "dwell together and organize their common life" (*Community* 48). Durkheim painted a much grimmer picture. For him, early societies are "hordes" (*Labor* 126) that cohere by "mechanic solidarity," i.e., by an automatic banding together to restrict any deviation from the shared standards in their "collective consciousness" (43–61, 84). Over time, societies become less unified as population increases and relocations diminish grounds for agreement and open paths for competition. The concept of individuality emerges under these changed circumstances.

Tönnies implied that this occurrence is regrettable. He described the new society as a loose association of individuals whose relations with each other are typically hostile. Instead of acting and thinking "in the spirit of the whole" (*Community* 65), they privilege their separate

selves and separate possessions, dealing with each other largely to pro-
cure things that they want. Their contractual relations represent truces
in their ongoing war (64–78). In contrast, Durkheim regarded the emer-
gence of the individual as evidence of progress (*Labor* 86) and the
emerging kind of society as more coherent. The new society is orga-
nized by a division of labor that assigns every individual a unique place
in and duty toward the whole. This solidarity is "organic," i.e., it obtains
because the members are "co-ordinated and subordinated to one
another around the same central organ" (126), and the bond among
them is stronger because it touches each member personally (102–05).
The fact of individuation actually reinforces the coherence of the new
order because individuality becomes the shared value of the group.
Although people no longer have a store of beliefs in a "collective con-
sciousness," they can agree upon the importance of the individual. "The
individual becomes the object of a sort of religion" that holds the group
together *because* of the differences among its members (122).

   Since Tönnies and Durkheim take an originally unified commu-
nity as the natural model for society, they see society as normally stable.
Rapid change, unbalanced relationships, and conflict in general signal
pathological developments that threaten the health of the social body.
Ultimately, Tönnies and Durkheim differ over the amount of differen-
tiation they find compatible with social health. Their contrasting ideas
can help us understand the tension that developed between
Wordsworth and Coleridge, for they drew apart over that very issue.
Wordsworth was able to accept much more differentiation and conflict
than was Coleridge. Tönnies avoided detailed analysis of what he
regarded as social pathology, but Durkheim wrote at length about the
problem of anomie and the value of social restraint. In the next chapter,
I identify the problem of anomie as the starting point for both *The
Borderers* and *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*; here, I wish to establish the
sociological significance of the concept.

   For Durkheim, the emergence of the individual is conducive to
social health only when individuals coordinate their actions in a mutu-
ally supporting—and constraining—system. Solidarity remains the pri-
mary sign of a normal society; what changes is the means—drawing
together of similar segments or coordination of different parts—by
which it obtains. If infrequent contact or other factors interfere with
individuals' sense of themselves as members of a whole system, society
will break down into the general condition of lawlessness or normless-
ness that Durkheim termed "anomie" (*Labor* 304).

   Durkheim did not invent the concept or the term *anomie*, though
he did adapt it particularly to sociological inquiry. Recently, Orru and

Mestrovic have called attention to the precedents—in ancient Greek philosophy, Old and New Testament commentary, English Renaissance theology, and the work of Durkheim's own contemporaries—for the use of *anomie* in order to correct the modern tendency to ignore the moral weight the concept carried for Durkheim. Durkheim did not discard the ethical associations. His original introduction to *The Division of Labor*, now not printed with the text, defined anomie as "the contradiction of all morality" (Orru 106; Mestrovic xi). Even without that introduction, *The Division of Labor*, along with Durkheim's later work on *Suicide*, clearly presents anomie as an evil to be avoided, a disease to be cured. Anomie occurs when society does not effectively guide individual behavior; people are left to their own devices in deciding how they should think or act. For Durkheim, individuals cannot make those decisions without reference to society: "Man is only moral because he lives in society, since morality consists in solidarity with the group, and varies according to that solidarity" (*Labor* 331).

Paradoxically, social regulations give individuals freedom; without regulation, individual desires swell beyond all means of fulfillment, and individual dissatisfaction grows with these unrealized and unrealizable aspirations, for

> all man's pleasure in acting, moving, and exerting himself implies the sense that his efforts are not in vain and that by walking he has advanced. However, one does not advance when one walks toward no goal, or—which is the same thing—when his goal is infinity. (*Suicide* 248)

If society supplies no meaningful goals and viable ways to reach them, individuals may resort to extreme measures—including suicide or, less usually, homicide—to resolve their frustration (*Suicide* 351). Durkheim's diagnosis of anomie as a pathological condition relies on his sense of society as normally coherent. His confidence in society to satisfy human needs can be seen to sacralize it. Society transcends individual experience, defies individual control (Orru 6); or in Mestrovic's more extreme formulation, society is equivalent to God, anomie to denial of that divinity (66). Durkheim, in fact, quite explicitly identified society as the source of the "sacred" or transcendental quality that constrains individuals. In a model that inverts the traditional relationship between the sacred and the profane, Durkheim's society generates whatever its members hold sacred; once produced, that collective consciousness is effectively outside of individual control. Durkheim justified his deification of society by stressing that

society has a creative power which no other observable being can equal. In fact, all creation, if not a mystical operation which escapes science and knowledge, is the product of a synthesis. . . . A society is the most powerful combination of physical and moral forces of which nature offers us an example. Nowhere else is an equal richness of different materials, carried to such a degree of concentration to be found. Then it is not surprising that a higher life disengages itself which, by reacting upon the elements of which it is the product raises them to a higher plane of existence and transforms them. (*Forms* 495)

Society as Process

Other founders dismissed comparisons between society and objects or beings as misleading; they defined society in terms of motion. "There is no such thing as society 'as such,'" argued Simmel (*Essays* 320). It "certainly is not a 'substance,' nothing concrete, but an *event*: it is the function of receiving and effecting the fate and development of one individual by the other" (*Sociology* 11).[2] In short, "society exists where a number of individuals enter into interaction" (*Essays* 314). A concept of interaction also animates Mead's view of society as the symbolic context through which people interpret each other's behavior. Instead of positing society as a collective being that subsumes individuals, Mead saw it as a "generalized other" continually created and recreated by individuals to account for their collective situations. It exists as the totality of their adjustments to each other (*Mind* 150–56, 253). Consonantly, Weber rejected the notion of a social being: "there is no such thing as a collective personality that acts" (*Economy* 14). Sociology does not study society but "social action," i.e., the behavior in which human beings orient themselves toward each other (*Economy* 22–26).

Although these founders were more wary than Durkheim or Tönnies of dissociating society from its constituent members, they nevertheless distinguished interaction from individual acts. Interaction occurs through forms (Simmel), roles (Mead), and types (Weber) that overreach the particular instances in which they appear. These founders charged sociology with identifying, describing, and analyzing these forms, roles, and types. Like Tönnies' and Durkheim's beings and objects, these figures are heuristic, but they serve even more forcefully than the physical comparisons to present society as both immaterial and real. The fullest explication of this paradox comes from Simmel, who wrote "How is Society Possible?" as a sort of prolegomenon to any future sociology.

Simmel roots his "epistemological analyses of society" in Kant's analysis of perception (*Essays* 355, 337–39). Just as people produce the concept of nature by combining perceived elements in their minds, so they produce the concept of society by combining their perceptions of individuals. Both concepts represent psychological syntheses, but they differ in structure. Nature consists of a synthesis of elements perceived as external to the perceiver. It does not have its own internal unity but depends for its coherence on the position of the perceiver as outside observer. In contrast, society includes each perceiver among the elements—the individuals—perceived, much as the idea of a self includes the perceiver as both perceiving subject and perceived object. Society has an internal coherence that does not depend upon an outside observer:

> Societal unification needs no factors outside its own component elements, the individuals. Each of them exercises the function which the psychic energy of the observer exercises in regard to external nature: the consciousness of constituting with the others a unity is actually all there is to this unity. (338)

People thus "*construct* [a] concept of society" (351 emphasis added) that enables them to know themselves and others. The concept is "real" because all reality is ultimately mental for Simmel: "Certainly, there is no doubt that all societal processes and instincts have their seat in minds and that sociation is, as a consequence, a psychical phenomenon" (329). As he explained in *The Philosophy of Money*, value is an "ideal concept"; neither subjective nor objective, it represents a "claim," a relationship across a perceived distance (68). Although value is not part of the material world, it is not illusory. The fact that we impute value is part of the real structure of our minds, which gives value a real dimension (59–60).

The ideational reality of society is the cornerstone of Simmel's sociology. His theory gives society precedence over individuals, though the priority is less monolithic in Simmel than in Tönnies and Durkheim. According to Simmel, "we cannot completely know the individuality of another" or even of ourselves (*Essays* 343, 349–50). Instead of knowing each other directly, people form distorted images of each other through generalizations. They locate each individual next to others in familiar categories of class and occupation, under standards of conduct and belief; then, they specify the *differentiae* that preserve each given person as unique (345). They even develop a sense of their own identities in this way: self-consciousness arises as individuals categorize themselves next to others and specify their similarities and differences (349–51). People thus know each other as beings who have both accessibly social and

inaccessibly nonsocial, or individual, dimensions. The concept of society becomes a meaningful phenomenon representing the accessible parts. To that extent, society can be a separate element in relation to individuals (348). It is "an objective form of subjective minds" (335), a "super-personal" element with which people interact. It takes on a functional reality of its own apart from the individuals in whom it originates much as the structure of a bureaucracy takes on a reality of its own apart from the individuals who fill its positions (352). The conceptual or ideational reality of society sustains the "empirical" reality of society: it gives meaningful and identifiable forms to the material, historical, and practical events and encounters in each person's life (351).

Going even further than Simmel in establishing the dependence of the individual on the social, Mead defined the self (as opposed to the "physiological organism") as a "social structure" (*Mind* 143). The self "is not initially there at birth; . . . [it] arises in the process of social experience" (135). According to Mead, human beings become selves when they can find symbolic value in their experiences.

When selves encounter objects (things or other individuals) in their environments, they use their "reflective intelligence" to refer these objects back to themselves. To make the reference meaningful, they must imagine the objects and themselves as parts of some social relationship. Imagination turns otherwise puzzlingly isolated objects into potentially significant symbols. They now appear as the "gestures" of another person toward the self, to which the self can respond as if completing a motion initiated by another: "Just as in fencing the parry is an interpretation of the thrust, so, in the social act, the adjustive response of one organism to the gesture of another is the interpretation of that gesture by that organism—it is the meaning of that gesture" (78). Imagination, then, constitutes the social reality in which "self" and "experience" have meaning. It produces symbols that people interpret; interpretation leads to action, which alters existing conditions and sets up a new situation calling for further interpretation and response. Social interaction is thus a process of infinite accommodation that proceeds by interpreting symbols and acting out their meaning.

In Mead's theory, people acquire interpretive skill through role-taking. If people are to complete a gesture, they must imagine an intention behind it, which they can do if they first imagine themselves in the role of the gesturer. From that position, they construe the possible significations of the gesture and the possible range of their own responses (73). Their expectations are likely to be viable within their communities because role-taking builds on observed experience. People first take roles when they are children, acting toward themselves in

ways they know parents, teachers, and siblings to act. From this simple beginning, role-taking becomes increasingly complex as adolescents assimilate the attitudes of civic leaders and even imagine the attitudes of their culture's "gods and heroes" toward themselves. After taking the roles of many specific others, people progress to taking the role of a "generalized other," a sort of personification of their community itself. Adults become functional members of their societies when they have identified with the attitudes and values of most other members sufficiently to experience the community as a gesture calling forth and responding to the behavior of its members in recognizable ways (150–56). Role-taking thus provides people with the interpretive skill to create and sustain supportive social systems.

Even more essentially, role-taking provides people with an awareness of the self as a "social structure" whose identity depends on relationship with others (143). When people take the roles of others, they internalize the assumed attitudes as a part of themselves Mead calls a "me" component.[3] Responding to the gestures of these others brings another part of the self, an "I" component, into action. People achieve self-consciousness when they become aware of themselves as actors, as "I"s who respond to others. For Mead, the self is very literally a "process" of relationships, for he conceives of thought itself as an "internalized conversation of gestures" between "I" and "Me" (173–76, 156). Effecting "the appearance of the other in the self, the identification of the other with the self, [and] the reaching of self-consciousness through the other" (253), role-taking makes selves and situations symbols in a continually evolving social text. People read each other's gestures and write new chapters of society to interpret them. A Meadian sociology studies the process of making society.

Interpretation also plays a key role in Weber's sociology. Although he denied the existence of a social entity, Weber acknowledged that such a concept can have a "causal influence on the course of actions of real individuals" when people believe that some such entity "exists or should exist." That belief will prompt them to orient their actions toward it, behaving in ways that will protect and preserve it (*Economy* 14). Thus the perception of a "legitimate order" creates such an order as people develop attitudes, norms, conventions, and even laws to realize that concept (31–33). Their efforts personify it, endowing it with expectations of them, which they in turn require themselves and others to fulfill. Society itself exemplifies such an order: it is a prevailing state of being "guaranteed" by the "subjective endorsement" of its members.

Weber charged sociology with making these subjectively realized objects intelligible. For him, sociology should strive for an "interpre-

tive understanding" of behavior to which actors attach subjective meaning. By subjective meaning, Weber did not refer only to conscious goals but to the variety of intellectual and emotional factors that converge in any given situation (4, 8–9, 21–22). Moreover, he realized that some subjective meanings were added by sociologists in the very act of observing others. Since interpretive understanding depends on sociologists' ability to sort out and analyze these converging factors, Weber devoted considerable effort to developing a method by which they can do so. I examine Weber's ideal-typical method and its importance for sociology in the next section.

The foregoing survey of five founders' definitions of society has identified the viewpoint that they share among themselves and, as I will show, with the Romantic poets. Whether they conceived of society as object or process, they regarded it as a compound of physical and mental conditions, an immaterial object with ascertainable features and effects. Moreover, they saw society as prior to the individual, making it the crucible of individual consciousness rather than its product. Having thus defined society, they worked to devise ways to study it.

Scientific Method

Assumptions about methodology erect one of the largest obstacles to bringing the founding sociologists and the earlier poets together on common ground. As long as we classify sociology as an objective, scientific discipline and poetry as a subjective act of individual expression, we will keep sociologists and poets far apart. One of my purposes in this book is to challenge our usual assumptions and classifications. In the section below, I indicate why we should not reduce sociology to a naive scientism. In subsequent chapters, I indicate why we should not reduce Romantic poetry to mere self-expression.

It is traditionally assumed that use of scientific method distinguishes a sociological approach to studying human behavior from earlier ways of generalizing about it, but that assumption is not entirely accurate. Although the founders expressed great enthusiasm for the natural sciences and often described their own work by analogy to those disciplines, they also carefully qualified the extent to which they saw sociology as a science. Early figures such as Comte and Spencer, who did advocate a strict scientism, have played a less central role in the development of sociology than have the more well-rounded figures I have called "founders."[4] That is not to say that Comte, Spencer, and other social scientists were uninfluential. A significant group of succeeding sociologists, especially in America and England, worked to make the

study of society an empirical and quantitative discipline. Tension between advocates of quantitative and qualitative methods continues to this day. Simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from science is present in the work of the founders themselves. This condition stems as much from the institutional situation of early sociologists as from their intellectual searches for appropriate ways to acquire the social knowledge they wanted. Although institutional situation and intellectual activity cannot fully be separated from each other, I make such a separation here to facilitate analysis of this complicated topic. In the remainder of this section, I examine the founders' intellectual relationship to science, which comes closer to some revisionist positions than to the modernist view. I take up the institutional factors in the next chapter.

Current debates about the nature of scientific method revolve around the possibility of attaining objective knowledge.[5] Few people defend the notion that science enjoys immunity from all personal, political, or monetary interests, though works by Collins, Longino, and Hekman reveal that that notion persists as an ideal for some and a straw man for others. The question is not so much whether values ever impinge on science as much as when and how they do so. Philosopher Helen Longino identifies two major positions about the relation between values and science. On one side, defenders of scientific integrity believe that values are extrinsic to scientific knowledge itself, so that their pressure can be resisted, though it often is not. Even if a researcher's situation determines what s/he studies, it does not determine the course or the results of the investigation once methodical inquiry begins. As a result, scientific knowledge is independent of the context of scientific research. On the other side, social constructionists, feminists, and Marxists maintain that values structure scientific method itself, determining not only what researchers study but what they see when they observe their chosen objects and what they accept as explanations. Scientific knowledge, like all other knowledge, depends on the perspective of the observer (Longino 7–11).

Longino's own position offers a compromise between these extremes, a compromise independently reached by scholars in other fields.[6] The compromise position takes scientific knowledge as intersubjective. Individual scientists cannot escape their own biases, but their work does not add to scientific knowledge until it has passed peer review, i.e., scrutiny by other individuals with other biases whose collective and accumulated work defines the terms in which additional inquiry can occur. Peer review filters out noticeably individual approaches, conclusions, or points of view (Longino 68–79; Bauer 42–62) so that "what remains is (relatively) impersonal rather than strictly

objective" (Bauer 48); scientific knowledge "reflects the critically achieved consensus of the scientific community" (Longino 79). Under these circumstances, "objectivity means intersubjectivity, so broad and deep, so taken for granted, that the resulting uniformity of perception is seen as inhering in the objects themselves" (Brown, "Science" 157).

The compromise position refigures the value-dependence of science as a strength rather than a weakness. Although it does not preserve the integrity of science apart from human interests, it does protect science from reduction to unrelated subjectivities. Defining science as a social activity makes it possible for us to study it as we study other social activities. We can ask what values inform it and why; moreover, we can ask why we have for so long valued the idea of a knowledge that is not social. Recognizing the values at issue, we can accept, reject, or modify them self-consciously.

Such an informed understanding of human behavior was the goal of sociology's founders. Those figures who were so fascinated with society as an immaterial object did not seek a social knowledge that excluded values but one that revealed how values figure in human activity, including the activity of studying society. The subjectivity they sought to escape was the subjectivity of partisanship—not only because they feared that personal eccentricities would trivialize their work but because, in the cases Proctor details, they wanted to keep their work from being coopted to further political causes they did not support (85–120). Scientific method offered them an escape hatch, but since it led to a view of knowledge as nonsocial that they could not accept, they elaborately qualified their positions on objectivity. Max Weber's theory of value-freedom or value-neutrality offers the greatest insight into the founders' value-*conscious* aims.

Value-Freedom and Ideal Types

Weber's position on value-freedom is much disputed. According to Proctor, Weber "maintained, in common with the natural sciences, the goal of neutral and apolitical knowledge" (146). Proctor argues, however, that Weber's exclusion of values from science amounts to "a critique of scientism" (149). Weber's intent was to save values from scientific theories that define them merely as effects of physical causes (143–44). Moreover, Weber's position amounts to a political strategy. By excluding all values from science, he could subvert the dominance of values he questioned (149). Proctor acknowledges that Weber did not oppose political advocacy by scientists or scholars, provided that they state their positions as value-laden (149).

Mommsen goes even further in challenging the belief that Weber found values irrelevant to science. Mommsen states:

> Contrary to customary opinion, Weber in no way thought it inappropriate for science to find its inspiration in passionate involvement in political events and vice versa. What he could not tolerate was the uncritical admixture of both spheres especially in the form of using the lecture to propagate political value-judgements. Two conditions were absolutely necessary: first, to declare one's own standpoint as openly as possible; and, second, to distinguish consistently between scientific analysis and political premises and deductions. Values and scientific deductions were to be examined for their validity on a separate basis, the former on the basis of personal preferences, the latter on the grounds of rational criteria. Yet in no way did he thereby want to support a purely positivistically understood conception of science as 'value-free' or even in the radical sense as 'value-judgement-free', that is, far removed from politics or values. (8)

Even if Weber strategically separated scientific knowledge from value judgments, he repeatedly argued for a contingent relationship between them that makes it impossible to reduce his position to endorsement of neutrality. Weber was especially concerned with making the study of values central to sociology.

According to Weber, "sociology can accomplish something that is never attainable in the natural sciences, namely the subjective understanding of the action of the component individuals" (*Economy* 15). Natural scientists can only observe and generalize about the physical relationships among objects. Although sociologists may start by observing external relationships, they must eventually delve into the motives and values informing them, even at the expense of living with more "hypothetical and fragmentary conclusions" than those of chemists or botanists (15).

To understand the meaning that actors attach to their behavior, sociologists must distinguish the actors' values from their own. This does not, for Weber, entail sharing the actors' perspectives or even abandoning one's own; rather, it entails locating one's own values next to others on the map of the social territory under scrutiny. Recognizing the bounds of one's own values constitutes the "scientific" part of social observation for Weber, a part requiring observers to treat their own values as equivalent to any others in producing identifiable consequences. The observer must resist the automatic assumption that his/her own

values correspond to reality while different ones imply an illusion about the "real" world. All values construct a real world for those holding them.

Having educed the consequences of following a particular value orientation, observers may take partisan positions about those courses. Indeed, Weber expected them to do so. He saw familiarity with the value-laden territory as the basis of the intelligent social criticism he wanted from contributors to the journal he edited. Outlining his editorial policy, he insisted:

> Every meaningful *value-judgment* about someone else's aspirations must be a criticism from the standpoint of one's own *Weltanschauung*; it must be a struggle against *another's* ideals from the standpoint of one's own. (*Methodology* 60)

Weber divided the sociological task into scientific and critical components to prevent the "confusion" of the values at issue: "it should be constantly made clear to the readers (and . . . to one's self!) exactly at what point the scientific investigator becomes silent and the evaluating and acting person begins to speak" (60). In another context, Weber exhorted university lecturers to bring their judgments into their classrooms as long as they were "absolutely *explicit*" when they did so (10). Hence, the "scientific" part of Weber's method—the dispassionate acknowledgment of one's own point of view—serves a larger sociological process that foregrounds values in human thought and action. It does not suggest that individuals can escape from their own biases—only that they can learn to recognize them and modify them by intelligent engagement with the biases of others.

Further support for my claim that Weber's goal was value-consciousness comes from an article by Wilhelm Hennis that carefully reconstructs the circumstances under which Weber's *Wertfreiheit* evolved.[7] Hennis traces Weber's position to his attempts to get his colleagues at the Verein für Sozialpolitik, a government agency that studied social problems and policies, to acknowledge a conflict of interests in their debates over East Elbian grain farming. Noting that Weber was embroiled in controversies over the use and value of land should remind Romanticists that Wordsworth and Coleridge were caught up in similar controversies. Poems such as "Michael" and "Reflections Upon Having Left a Place of Retirement," which I analyze in Chapter Four, center on conflicting interests in rural experience. Grappling with such conflicts assisted the growth of the poets' sociology as it assisted the growth of Weber's.

With respect to the farming debates, Weber objected to his colleagues' unselfconscious references to "productivity" because, he said, the term elides the competing values at issue. From an economic standpoint, productivity refers to the amount of grain grown in a given area; this productivity increases when farms are large and staffed by migrant workers. From a political standpoint, productivity refers to the gainful employment of natives in the area; that productivity increases when farms are small and operated by residents (Hennis 117–19). Weber's method of value-free inquiry would bring the mutually exclusive interests to light, forcing those working on a solution to the grain production problem to admit what interest they valued (119). What we read as Weber's polemic on value-freedom comes from his years of struggling with his colleagues over this issue (117). Hennis's reconstruction of this context should silence "the reproach that Weber's postulate leads to indifference towards the problem of value"; that reproach "characterizes Weber's efforts as little as the widely held misunderstanding that Weber limited the competence of science to the clarification of 'technical' questions" (116). Clearly, Weber wanted people to recognize the values informing their arguments, judgments, and policies.

Individuals can recognize values by studying social action through ideal types. Weber himself, for example, recognized the values behind charisma and bureaucracy by using ideal types. I elaborate on this particular example in Chapter Seven, where it is relevant for an understanding of the charismatic heroes in Byron's works. Here, I wish to make some more general points about the creation and use of any ideal type.

Ideal types are more specialized forms of the concepts on which, for Weber, all knowledge depends. In his view, direct knowledge of the "real" world is unavailable to us; we know it only through our conceptual abstractions (*Methodology* 94). Since sociologists want to understand activities that are meaningful to their pursuers (*Economy* 4), they must devise concepts to give them access to that axiological dimension of reality. They begin by abstracting the prominent relevant features from observed examples of a given activity and forming a model from them. This model, or ideal type, filters out all other factors that impinge on the activity in the real world and shows the action in an exaggerated form. It thus enables the sociologist to distinguish the meanings and motives essential to that type of action from competing meanings and motives observable in the given example. With that knowledge in mind, the sociologist returns to the example to compare and contrast it with the ideal type. By noting where the two converge and diverge, the sociologist can learn what meanings inform the observed activity

(*Methodology* 89–94). To quote Weber, "The *confrontation* of empirical reality with the ideal type brings to light the motives and goals at stake in a particular course of action" (110). By plotting the real along the map of the ideal, observers learn "that all action and . . . inaction imply in their consequences the espousal of certain values . . . and . . . the rejection of certain others" (53), and they discover what values are adequate to what goals in the case they are investigating.

Weber cautions against using ideal types to judge the values they bring to light (*Economy* 6–7, 18; *Methodology* 91–92). Despite the favorable connotation of the term (at least in its English translation), ideal types imply nothing about the morality of the orientations they represent. They are not instruments for evaluation but for interpretation. Their function could be more accurately and vividly designated by a literal translation of an alternative term, *Gedankenbild* or "thought pictures," that Weber sometimes used for ideal types (*Methodology* 89–90).[8] This term foregrounds the metaphoric quality of ideal types, a quality that Richard Harvey Brown identifies in all models. Brown argues that models are metaphoric because they "are *for* something rather than *of* something: . . . the model is intended to serve some conceptual purpose, not to be an imitation of a thing's appearance" (*Poetic* 95). Ideal types accomplish a sort of cognitive mimesis. They reveal the usually invisible values that inform observable activities and structures. By showing the value-ladenness of empirical reality, they serve as models *for* interpreting the simultaneously material and immaterial condition of lived experience. Insofar as ideal types are models *for* something, ideal-typical analysis might usefully be placed within the category of "heuristic discourse" that Rajan extends to Romantic poetry. In contrast to "hermeneutic discourse" that requires "the reconstruction of an original meaning," heuristic discourse conduces to "the production of a new meaning" (33).[9] Ideal types have the advantage of fostering the "interpretive understanding" that Weber made the goal of sociology without implying that sociologists have some special powers of perception—either an ability to see with some perspectiveless objectivity or an ability to share another's point of view.

Although Weber's notion of interpretive understanding (*Verstehen*) is often equated with some intuition or sympathy, Hekman points out that the equation is mistaken. Weber claims no direct access to the psyches of others or to empirical reality itself; rather, he claims that we can learn what concepts others are using in their engagements with reality. Ideal types mediate this knowledge. They make "publicly accessible," and hence intersubjectively available, the meanings and motives sufficient for action (Hekman 45–47). Ideal-typical analysis does not com-

pare concepts with reality but different conceptualizations of reality (Hekman 34). The interpretive understanding it fosters is of the particular concepts at issue in a given situation. For Weber, such understanding is prerequisite to intelligent judgment about the situation.

To the extent that Weber makes the achievement of understanding and the exercise of judgment two separate activities, he seems to consider the analytical part of sociology as "free" from the sociologist's values. If that were the case, his position would be analogous to that of the natural scientist who separates the core of scientific knowledge from the social values surrounding it. Such a position would, however, be inconsistent with Weber's sense of the value-ladenness of all behavior. Far from excluding the sociologist's own values from ideal-typical analysis, Weber makes them central to the construction and use of ideal types. Because ideal types are not universally valid laws that can be applied to any case, they must be specifically formulated for each investigation. To construct one, a sociologist must determine his/her motives and goals in undertaking the given study, for the purpose of the study determines what observed features will be relevant for an ideal type. Observation, in turn, "presupposes" a "value-orientation" toward what is in view; without such an orientation, the situation would not appear to be a worthwhile "object of investigation" (*Methodology* 76). By having to specify the meaning of their behavior, sociologists can become self-conscious about their own values and how they affect their understanding of what they observe. They thus learn *why* they criticize or endorse certain actions.

Weber's value-freedom, then, does not imply that values should not figure in sociological study but that no individual's values should be free from rigorous examination. His position comes close to the current revisionist compromise on the objectivity of scientific method. Indeed, Hekman argues that Weber's ideal-typical analysis is the appropriate basis for intersubjectivity among sociologists: it reins in scientific extremists who deprive social actions of meaning in studying only empirical data as well as interpretive extremists who lose sight of structural restraints on subjectivity (Hekman 1–17, 60, 166–67). Ideal-typical analysis, then, can serve as the "scientific method" of sociology: it provides a common orientation toward understanding the meanings and motives of social action that gives sociological statements the status of explanations about behavior just as the logic and procedures of the natural sciences support a common orientation toward empirically valid truth that gives scientific statements the status of explanations about the physical universe. As Hekman notes, Weber recognized the objectivity of the natural sciences as a Western cultural value; people who do

not share the value may certainly follow the logic of scientific analysis, but they will not accept the statements as relevant explanations of anything (Hekman 160, 166–67; Weber, *Methodology* 56, 68). Weber thus worked implicitly with a sense of scientific and sociological knowledge as culturally significant products of intersubjective communities. My goal in this book is to bring the Romantic poets into the intersubjective community of sociologists.

Ideal-Typical Affinities

No other founding sociologist promoted ideal-typical analysis as effectively as Weber, but the methods of Tönnies, Simmel, Mead, and even Durkheim, along with the practices of the poets that I describe in later chapters, have some affinities with it. However divergent their specific approaches may seem, they share an interest in finding an adequate technique to fathom the ideational depth of observable social life.

Of the other founders, only Tönnies called his concepts ideal types. Tönnies' ideal types belong to the branch of sociology he called "pure" sociology in the three-part (pure, empirical, applied) structure he devised for that discipline. "Pure" sociology aims to devise concepts appropriate for understanding social relationships, which require a special conceptual apparatus because they are not directly observable. Sociology

> differs from the natural sciences by virtue of the fact that its objects can neither be made visible by either telescope or microscope nor be perceived by the other senses. Only thought is capable of discerning them. They are a product of thought because they are abstracted from real life situations, that is, from the facts of social interaction. (Tönnies, *On Sociology* 93)

By working comparatively with the concepts of pure sociology, one can achieve knowledge of particular relationships: "the procedure is to insert particular names and conditions in lieu of those of the fictitious and general instances" (17).

Although Cahnman and Heberle's edition of *On Sociology* emphasizes the resemblances between Tönnies' and Weber's ideal types, Tönnies' claims about his concepts are more modest. For Tönnies, ideal types classify social relationships much as the concepts of genus and species classify organisms; they thus accomplish a "fiction necessary for scientific analysis"—the creation of a whole through which to relate parts (Tönnies, *Community* 36). While Tönnies' efforts to compare soci-

ology and biology would seem to make him a proponent of "objective" social science, his reference to the fictive context of scientific study shows that he acknowledges the priority of theory over observation in both fields. As Cahnman and Heberle write in their introduction to Tönnies' theory, Tönnies held that "social processes must be understood from the inside out, that is, as conditioned by the varieties of human volition and their contradictory indications" (*On Sociology* xiii). Indeed, Tönnies' own construction of ideal types begins with "the concretely imagined concept of humanity as a whole" (*On Sociology* 46). By promoting "the intuitive and entirely mental recognition of such a whole," ideal types offer a frame of reference through which to understand the more differentiated human situations in which people actually live (46–47).

Strictly speaking, neither Simmel nor Mead used an ideal-typical method, but Simmel's formal analysis and Mead's emphasis on role-taking converge with that approach in their commitments to understanding the meanings and motives of observable behavior. Moreover, Simmel and Mead are especially conscious of knowledge as a symbol for the shared beliefs of some particular community.

According to Simmel, all sciences constitute a subject matter that does not exist apart from their point of view. Simmel charged sociology with constituting a subject matter made up of the processes of sociation, i.e., the ways in which people "modify each other" when they come together in society (*Sociology* 11). For Simmel, identifying and analyzing these forms of sociation was the most pressing task facing sociology in his day (*Essays* 316–19). To accomplish this task, sociologists should abstract the forms from the contents of observable interactions. For example, superordination and subordination, conflict and consensus, dyadic and triadic groupings are forms of interaction (all of which Simmel himself abstracted and studied); their content consists of the meaning the actors attach to them in particular cases. The content is unique to each situation, but the forms provide a common ground for the variable meanings. The values sustaining the monarchy of Louis XIV and the government of Robespierre may differ considerably, but these seemingly unique events both exist as social processes of super- and subordination. Insofar as knowing this form makes it possible to understand particular instances of social interaction that one might want to study, the forms serve as ideal types. I return to this point in Chapter Seven, when I address the relationship between Prometheus and Jupiter in Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*.

In his own work, Simmel placed more stress on identifying and analyzing forms than on applying them to particular instances. He con-

sidered forms universal, and he planned to provide a body of them for other sociologists to apply according to their "accidental knowledge of fact" (*Sociology* 89). At first glance, the notion of forms as universal suggests an analogy with the belief in objective scientific knowledge: both imply that some knowledge is independent of human perspectives. Given Simmel's insistence on the perspectival nature of all knowledge, however, such an analogy would misrepresent his position. Forms of sociation are universal only within the range of the sociological perspective. They are conceptual tools created out of a particular interest—the desire to know how collectivity affects individual behavior. The forms themselves are "fictitious" (*Sociology* 89): they do not exist apart from the sociological viewpoint. Form and content always appear together from other perspectives; separating them is heuristic for sociology much as separating cognitive faculties from ideas is heuristic for epistemology: it lets sociologists study how people come together in society much as philosophers study how thoughts come together in minds (*Essays* 312–18). For Simmel, then, specialized studies have specialized knowledges that are intersubjectively meaningful to their practitioners. He places them all on a mental continuum:

> There is only a difference in degree between the studies of man and the studies of external nature. After all, the natural sciences too, inasmuch as they are phenomena of the intellectual life, have their locus in the mind (*Essays* 330)

The forms of sociation represent the intersubjective knowledge of the sociological community. Simmel's understanding of the universality of this knowledge comes closer to the current position on scientific knowledge as the symbol of scientists' shared values than to the modernist view of scientific knowledge as independent of scientists' values.

In stressing the *sociological* orientation of his work, Simmel encourages a consciousness about *sociological* values—about the very meaning of seeing society as an object to know. He might be said to go beyond even Weber in exploring the value-ladenness of all inquiry. His forms are literally "thought pictures" of sociological cognition. Predictably, Simmel's modernist heirs grew impatient with his philosophizing. Recognizing the usefulness of the forms he identified for applied studies, they criticized him for not doing more himself to apply them systematically or catalogue them exhaustively. Summarizing this position, Frisby calls Simmel a "sociological *flaneur*"—an idler who wanted to take and show snapshots of social phenomena without committing himself to a research program, one whose "impressionistic" approach to