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Modernity, Democracy, and the Making of a Civic Sociologist

> *With all historical time to develop in, sociology is only about a
> hundred years old.*

—Martindale (1988, p. 3)

A number of years ago, I started asking my students how many of them were going on to become sociologists. As you can imagine, only a very few would raise their hands. I followed up by asking, "Then why are you here?" I used that occasion to invite students to consider theory as a way of understanding their lives: Max Weber's work actually gives us a pretty good explanation about why a college education is necessary to gain entry-level positions in a society such as ours. But just a few semesters ago I realized something. While my little exercise provided a way of understanding how theory could be important, I hadn't addressed the bigger issue: Why sociology? Or, to put it more broadly, why should you study society at all? The above quote by Don Martindale puts the same issue in a more historical context: Why did sociology develop when it did? The answers to why you should study society and why sociology was created are tied up together with what we call modernity.

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

In this book, we're going to begin thinking about society and our place in it using a specific view of modernity, one that assumes a rational actor and an ordered world that can be directed. It's important to note that this approach to understanding modernity and knowledge is just one of many possibilities. So, this story of modernity is simply our beginning; it's our touchstone, the place from which to organize our thinking. As you move through the book, you'll find that many contemporary theorists, and even some classical ones, point to social factors and processes that make it difficult to be a reasoned social actor. There are also theories that indicate that the social world may not be ordered, but rather, is a kind of chaotic system. And, more fundamentally, the social world may not be objective, but may

simply be a subjective attribution of meaning. Further, some critical theorists argue that the idea of scientific knowledge is intrinsically linked to power and is thus oppressive. That's why we are starting with this view of modernity and modern knowledge: It's the ideal, and it's the one that many people assume to be alive and well in modern democracy.

The Making of Modernity—Social Factors and Intellectual Ideas

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

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

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

stands the test of time; religious knowledge is valid if it is revealed by God; but modern knowledge is valid if and only if it is empirically tested and works.

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

Modernity's Two Projects

Progress in modernity—and thus the intent of modern knowledge—is focused on two main arenas: technical and social. The technical project of modernity is generally the domain of science. In science, knowledge is used to control the universe through technology. While we've come to see science as the bastion for the technical project of modernity, the responsibility for the social project is seemingly less focused, at least in our minds today. Generally speaking, the institutional responsibility for the social project rests with the democratic state. Prior to Western modernity, the primary form of government in Europe was feudalism, which was based on land tenure and personal relationships. These relationships, and thus the land, were organized around the monarchy with clear social, hereditary divisions between royalty and peasants. Therefore, the experience of the everyday person in feudal Europe was one where personal obligations and one's relationship to the land were paramount. Every person was keenly aware of his or her obligations to the lord of the land. These were seen as a kind of familial relationship, with fidelity as its chief goal. The main type of political identity available in feudalism was the *subject*—subjects are placed under the authority, control, or dominion of the monarchy.

Modern democracy began with the American and French Revolutions. The U.S. Declaration of Independence captures this new type of government: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that

they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The social project of modernity, then, was founded on the belief in natural, human rights—rights that cannot be given to people by a government because they belong to every person by birth. A necessary implication of this belief is that government can only rule by consent of the governed; that is, modern government can only rule through democracy.

While the main identity available in feudalism was the subject, in a modern democracy it is the *citizen*. It's important for you to see the connection between modern knowledge and citizenship. Both science and citizenship are based on the idea of a new kind of person—the supreme individual with the power to use his or her own mind to determine truth and to use reason to discover the world as it exists and make rational decisions. This belief gave the Enlightenment its other name: the Age of Reason. This new idea, this reasoning person, obviously formed the basis of scientific inquiry; more importantly, for our purposes, it also formed the basis for the social project. Democracy is not only possible because of belief in the rational individual; this new person also *necessitates* democracy. The only way of governing a group of individuals, each of whom is capable of rational inquiry and reasonable action, is through their consent.

Defining the Demos

Part of what I'll be asking you to do in this book is to unpack (analyze) some of the things we take for granted. The democratic citizen is one of those ideas we will be looking at closely. Our word *democracy* comes from two Greek words: *dēmos,* which simply means "the masses" or "the people," and *kratos,* which is "strength" or "to rule." Democracy, then, means the strength to rule rests in the common people. Of course, there are assumptions in back of what we mean by the common people. As was mentioned, the main type of political person available in modern democracies is the citizen. But, as Shakespeare said, there's the rub. Just what exactly is a citizen? More precisely, what kinds of people qualify as citizens?

The Problem of the Citizen

This issue goes all the way back to ancient Greece and the first democracies. Plato had deep problems with democracy because he felt that it would lead to the rule of the poor and ignorant over the intelligentsia. There's a way in which the issue for Plato was really about public opinion versus authoritative

opinion. The elite were well educated and disciplined in their personal lives, and thus ideal for making decisions regarding the public good. The masses, on the other hand, Plato saw as uneducated and living according to the dictates of their physical appetites rather than the soul or mind. This problem was compounded by the Sophists. The **Sophists** were a group of itinerant intellectuals who made their living by teaching courses on the nature of language, culture, virtue, and so on. More than any other group, they were the founders of *rhetoric,* the science and art of persuasion. Part of what they did was to sell their services to local politicians. In some sense, they were the first spin doctors. They taught politicians how to persuade a crowd to their own ends. The masses were susceptible to these speeches that were tuned by rhetoric. It was their lack of education and their responsiveness to persuasion that worried Plato about the masses.

The problem of the citizen has also been an issue in modern nations, but for different reasons. The history of the United States, for example, has to a large degree been defined by contentions over the meaning of "all men" in the U.S. Declaration of Independence. Initially, only white, property-owning, Protestant, heterosexual males over the age of 21 were intended. It's important to note that there are two different issues at stake between what the ancient Greeks were debating and what's usually seen as the problem in the United States. The latter is a legal issue of rights: What social groups will have the right to vote? This is the issue of universal suffrage. For the Greek philosophers, however, it was an issue of quality or responsibility: What kind of person is best qualified for civic responsibility?

The interesting thing is that in modern democracy, we usually assume that every voting member of the citizenry is capable of the kind of rationality needed—ironically, this is precisely what Plato was worried about: Under the tenets of natural rights and the autonomous individual, we believe every person by birth is capable of reasoned decision making and action, and this capability is seen as a right, whether exercised or not. Historically, we have focused on the legal issues of civil rights and universal suffrage. Over the past 200 years or so, U.S. citizens have decided that membership in a particular group is not a basis for determining who has the right to democratic participation. However, given the age in which we live, we ought to consider the implications of what modern democracy has simply assumed. Rather than glossing it over, let's take a moment and think about the characteristics a modern citizen ought to embody—the kind of person who is best qualified for civic responsibility.

Bringing together what we've already learned about the Enlightenment and knowledge, along with the projects of modernity, we can say that the modern citizen is assumed to be much like an itinerant scientist, with basically

the same goals (explain, predict, control), using similar methods, with similar pragmatic ends. Further, the modern citizen has a mandate—indeed, an obligation—to think critically about democracy. After the U.S. Declaration of Independence talks about life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, it goes on to say the following:

> That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it. . . . [I]t is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

It is thus the ethical duty of all democratic citizens to prepare themselves to the best of their abilities to continually hold the government up to scrutiny—much as a scientist doubts and tests—in order to give their best efforts in securing the social project of modernity for all people. This idea of the citizen as a "lay social scientist" is clearly related to the birth of sociology.

It's extremely important that you see the connection between modernity and the kind of person you can potentially and are expected to be, especially as it is related to knowledge. Because it's often difficult to understand ourselves as historically specific, I want to repeat what I said earlier: Science and citizenship are both based on a new way of knowing and a new type of person: an individual with the power to use his or her own mind to determine truth and make rational decisions. This belief gave the Enlightenment its other name: the Age of Reason. This new idea, this reasoning person, obviously formed the basis of scientific inquiry; more importantly for our purposes, it also formed the basis for the social project. Democracy is not only *possible* because of belief in the rational individual; this new person also *necessitates* democracy. Another way to put this is that modern democracy stands or falls based on this type of person.

It's also significant to note that the Enlightenment's view of the person included the idea of *the autonomous individual*. In large part, this notion owes its existence to the Protestant Reformation. Rather than receiving God's grace because of and through the Church, Protestantism separated out the individual and made him or her stand before God's judgment. Judgment was determined by faith, but it was the individual's decision that was the crux of the matter. According to Protestant doctrine, being baptized as an infant couldn't "save" a person because it wasn't based on the individual's decision to follow Christ. The Enlightenment's idea of the reasoning, deciding individual is clear in Protestant doctrine. It's also clear that the person's individuality is the result of birth. Remember these words from the Declaration of

Independence: People are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." Early modernity brought with it, then, this vision of the autonomous person: "the human person as a fully centered, unified individual, endowed with the capacities of reason, consciousness, and action, whose 'center' consisted of an inner core, which first emerged" at birth and continued to unfold "throughout the individual's existence" (Hall, 1996, p. 597).

America and the First Sociologists

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

Two of these itinerate sociologists were Alexis de Tocqueville and Harriet Martineau. Tocqueville was French and lived from 1805 to 1859. His best-known work is *Democracy in America,* a two-volume investigation of the United States published in 1835 and 1840. Harriet Martineau was British, lived from 1802 to 1876, and is well-known for several works. The first is her translation of Auguste Comte's *Positive Philosophy,* one of the foundation stones of science in general and sociology specifically—Comte is usually seen as the founder of sociology. Another of Martineau's important works is *How to Observe Morals and Manners,* published in 1838. The work was quite probably the first methodology book for the social sciences. It's important to note that this book is addressed to "travelers" and "tourists." Remember, modernity brought rapid increases in transportation and communication technologies; people were thus able to move about the globe in a way that was never before possible. Moreover, they were challenged and excited by the new idea of knowledge that modernity brought. Many thus set out to discover society, just as the founders of science did with the physical world.

Martineau wrote her methodology book because she was concerned: People were making observations of society haphazardly and were reaching conclusions with bias and with too little research—her concern was thus much like Plato's. To make her point, Martineau (1838/2003) asks the traveler if he

or she would feel confident to answer if someone were to ask about the "geology of Corsica, or the public buildings of Palermo" (p. 14). She then takes the part of the traveler and answers this rhetorical question herself: "'Oh, I can tell you nothing about that—I never studied geology; I know nothing about architecture'" (p. 14).

Please notice clearly what Martineau is saying: People can and should observe, investigate, and discover society. But we cannot and should not take this endeavor lightly. Yes, everybody can observe, but everybody needs to be prepared: "Of all the sciences . . . [the study of society is] the most difficult in its application" (p. 15). Martineau wrote *How to Observe Morals and Manners* on her voyage to the United States, where she collected data for her subsequent three-volume work, *Society in America,* published in 1837. These two books obviously go hand-in-hand: *Morals and Manners* contains the methodology Martineau used to study American democracy. Martineau's basic method was to compare what America said it was going to do (morals) with what it was actually doing (manners). Today, the title might be *Ethics and Practices*. Thus, Martineau very clearly saw the American experiment as an ethical, moral issue. In her mind, then, the ethics of democracy are the most important causal force—practices should flow from ethics.

Martineau isn't alone among early sociologists in seeing this connection. Jane Addams (1860–1935), the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize (1931), also understood this central issue. In the introduction to her book *Democracy and Social Ethics,* Addams (1902/2002) says, "It is well to remind ourselves . . . that 'Ethics' is but another word for 'righteousness,' that for which many men and women of every generation have hungered and thirsted, and without which life becomes meaningless" (p. 5). Further, Addams sees democracy not "merely as a sentiment which desires the well-being of all men, nor yet as a creed which believes in the essential dignity and equality of all men, but as that which affords a rule of living as well as a test of faith" (p. 7).

Practicing Democracy

As these early sociologists saw it, there are certain assumed practices that come with democracy. Two of the most important practices and ideas involve the association of the individual with the collective and emergent ethics. Something is said to *emerge* if it rises from or comes out of something else, as steam emerges out of water and heat. In this case, the ethical practices of democracy arise from specific kinds of associations between the individual and the living collective. In this way, democracy is intrinsically

open-ended. It's an emergent, ongoing project. American democracy as it is set forth in the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, and the Bill of Rights explicitly structures the system in this way. That's the reason why freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and the freedom to gather are among the rights of citizens.

Of our three sociologists so far, Addams had the clearest philosophical base for understanding the idea of emergence intrinsic in democracy. Addams was a pragmatist. Pragmatism is the only indigenous and distinctively American form of philosophy. **Pragmatism** rejects the notion that there are any fundamental truths and instead proposes that *truth* is relative to time, place, and purpose. Pragmatism is thus "an idea about ideas" and a way of relativizing ideology (Menand, 2001, p. xi), but this relativizing doesn't result in relativism. In fact, pragmatism is founded upon clear and strong ethical beliefs. However, rather than these ethics being based in some outside, preexisting force or system, *the ethical basis of pragmatism is the belief in human reason and consensus.* Thus, truth in pragmatism is specific to community: Human action and decisions aren't determined or forced by society, ideology, or preexisting truths. Rather, decisions and ethics emerge out of a consensus that develops through interaction.

Ethics and morality are thus social rather than individual and come out of experience, experimentation, and diversity. Addams specifically argues that democratic citizens are morally obligated to seek out interactions with people *unlike themselves,* because truly democratic ideals and practices cannot come out of interactions within a homogeneous group. This is a law of people and culture: Patterned and repeated interactions among individuals will create and sustain similar and particularized cultural beliefs. Democracy, which is fundamentally concerned with bringing freedom and equality to all humankind, must then seek diverse people and diverse interactions, out of which will come what Tocqueville calls the *moral majority.*

The Moral Majority

During the 1980s, there was a Christian political organization and movement called the Moral Majority. The organization, founded by Jerry Falwell, was responsible for creating the idea of the New Christian Right and is credited with significantly helping Ronald Reagan get elected president. The Moral Majority supported mass media censorship; American military strength; and a return to "family values," which included opposition to abortion, homosexuality, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Though the organization disbanded at

the end of the eighties, Falwell brought the idea back to life for the twenty-first century in 2004 with the Moral Majority Coalition.

It's interesting to view Tocqueville's discussion of the moral majority alongside Falwell's. In doing so, my point isn't directed at any differences in belief; most of the issues that Falwell is concerned with were not on the national agenda in the 1830s. But there is a pronounced difference in foundations. For Falwell, the emphasis was on the moral beliefs of Evangelical Christianity. In contrast, Tocqueville's emphasis is on the *morality inherent in the democratic process of the majority*. The belief in back of this is the idea that "there is more enlightenment and wisdom in a numerous assembly than in a single man" (Tocqueville, 1835/1969, p. 247). The emphasis here is on diversity of thought. It is, as Tocqueville says, "the theory of equality applied to brains" (p. 247). The morality of the majority isn't found in a homogeneous belief system—quite the opposite. The moral majority is found when the greater part of the citizenry come together for political discourse where diverse ideas can clash and where reason can create consensus. Modern morality, then, isn't a static belief system; modern morality is the ongoing and public meeting of the minds of the majority of people. As Jane Addams (1902/2002) puts it, "Unless all men and all classes contribute to a good, we cannot even be sure it is worth having" (p. 97).

Modern Institutions

Modernity also brought with it new institutions and new institutional arrangements. In premodern society, social institutions overlapped quite a bit. One of the most important overlaps was between religion and government. In feudalistic Europe, for example, the right of kings to rule was legitimized by religion, and second and third sons of royalty were often trained clergymen. If we look back further in history, we can see that in almost every society, religion and government overlapped and legitimated one another.

Modernity, then, is unique in that it *intentionally separates church and state*. This separation is necessary because democracy cannot function under absolute truth and legitimation. **Theocracy** is the polar opposite of democracy. In a theocracy, the power to rule comes from the top (God) down; in a democracy, the power to rule goes from the bottom (citizens) up. However, it's also clear by looking at early social thinkers and sociologists that this separation did not necessarily mean that religion wasn't important or would go away. On the contrary, religion plays a key role in modernity; and we'll explore that role in Chapter 4. For now, let's think about the unique place that education holds in the social project.

Education and Democracy

Martineau (1838/2003) argues that in the history of humankind there are two great social powers—force and knowledge—and the story of human progress is the movement away from one and toward the other. Social relations began through physical force and domination and the idea that might makes right. Knowledge, as we understand it today, was of little worth. Rather, what was important in terms of knowledge was tradition. In such societies, the past is everything. Thus, by definition, traditional authority isn't critically examined and maintains the status quo; it "falls back upon precedent, and reposes there" (p. 45).

Modern knowledge, as we've seen, is clearly different. It values reason, progress, and change. The important point here is that Martineau sees a clear link between modern knowledge and government. Power in a modern state rests upon the people. The method through which democratic citizens are to exercise their power is through knowledge, which is why education is a keystone for modernity. Tocqueville (1835/1969) likewise sees education as the foundation of democracy: "The first duty imposed on those who now direct society is to educate democracy" (p. 12). And Jane Addams (1902/2002) tells us that democracy is based on belief in the power residing in each one of us, and that it is education that will unlock that potential: "We are impatient to use the dynamic power residing in the mass of men, and demand that the educator free that power" (p. 80).

Martineau (1838/2003) argues that two of the most important indicators of the relationship between education and freedom are the extent of free education and the position of the university. The *extent of free education* is an unmistakable measure of societal support of the ideas of equality and democracy. In modern countries, education is perceived as the legitimate way to get ahead. In other words, the kind of job and pay you get is initially based on your level of education. Martineau is saying that to understand the level of equality that society supports, one need only look at the kinds of job opportunities that free, public education provides. For example, if a society supports public education only through high school, it indicates that the level of equality the state is interested in supporting is only equal to the jobs that require a high school education.

On this point, Martineau's indictment of America is clear. While our moral says that we believe in equality of opportunity for all people, our manners (practices) say different. While Tocqueville's (1835/1969) focus isn't the same as Martineau's, his criticism is identical:

I think there is no other country in the world where, proportionately to population, there are so few ignorant and so few learned individuals as in America. Primary education is within reach of all; higher education is hardly available to anybody. (p. 55)

The second indicator of the place of education in society is the *regard given the university.* Martineau (1838/2003) claims that "in countries where there is any popular Idea of Liberty, the universities are considered its stronghold" (p. 203). The reason for this link between liberty and universities is precisely the connection that was made earlier: Democratic citizens are morally obligated to continually examine the state in terms of its progress in fulfilling the social goals of modernity. And this examination is to be insistent, assertive, and uncompromising. As Martineau puts it, "It would be an interesting inquiry how many revolutions warlike and bloodless, have issued from seats of learning" (p. 203).

Not only are the purpose, content, and environment of the university important, but so are its students, in particular their motivation for study. To the degree that students are motivated to obtain a university education for a job, to that degree is education for freedom compromised. Martineau (1838/2003) makes a comparison between students in Germany and those in the United States. German students are noted for their quest for knowledge: The German student may "remain within the walls of his college till time silvers his hairs." The young American student, on the other hand, "satisfied at the end of three years that he knows as much as his neighbors . . . plunges into what alone he considers the business of life" (p. 205). Obviously, in advanced capitalist society, getting a college education is important for economic success. But seeing and using education *primarily* as a method of credentialing and job placement sounds the death knell for democracy.

Civic Sociology and the Craft of Citizenship

To state the obvious, there is an intrinsic relationship between education and democracy. As a citizen, you need to be able to understand and use information and ideas to make reasoned decisions about the world around you. More than at any other time in our history, democracy matters, and being a citizen offers a horizon of possibilities. Today, democracy implies more—much more—than simply voting. It's my intent in this book to encourage you to practice your citizenship through **civic sociology**:

A civic sociology . . . evidences a desire to connect with people (citizens), their concerns and their biographical problems. It produces [writings and stories] that move people to action, works that promote serious discussion about democratic and personal politics. (Denzin, 1996, p. 747)

We'll see as we move through the book that there are new challenges to this type of participatory democracy. The words of C. Wright Mills (1959) have never been truer:

> What they need . . . is a quality of mind that . . . may be called the *sociological imagination.* . . . [T]he first lesson of the social science that embodies it—is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate only by locating himself within his period. . . . The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. (pp. 5–6, emphasis added)

The sociological imagination and civic sociology begin with critical thinking.

Critical Thinking

The people who hold the power in society—in a democracy, that would be you and me—need to have informed opinions about how to guide society. Here's an analogy: If you've been diagnosed with cancer, whose opinion do you want, radio talk show personality Don Imus or a trained oncologist? Now, you may and probably should get several opinions, but if you have half a lick of sense, the people whose advice you seek will all be professionals trained in their discipline and not Imus. What you are looking for in choosing an oncologist over Imus is an *authoritative opinion* rather than personal opinion. Imus may have an opinion about cancer, but it would be a personal opinion, not a knowledgeable one. Everyone seems to feel entitled to an opinion, and that's fine. Having simple opinions about things like what music is worth listening to is okay, but not about things that inform our participatory democracy. I believe that the question of democratic participation is at least as important as finding a good oncologist to treat cancer. Consider this: If I don't get a good oncologist, I might die; if we don't participate democratically, tens of thousands of people could die, or be oppressed, or suffer needlessly, or the environment could be destroyed, and so on.

There are a number of elements that go into an informed opinion. One of them is, of course, knowledge. The oncologist knows more about cancer than does Imus. Yet there's more to this issue of knowledge than most people might think. Imus could go online and get quite a bit of information about cancer; but the oncologist would still offer the more knowledgeable opinion of the two because the medical doctor understands the information about cancer within the context of a knowledge base. This is an extremely important issue that most people today miss: There is a difference between information and knowledge. In previous times, information was only a piece of the

learning process; equally important was the training of the mind. The computer and Internet have made information abundant, readily available, and ever-changing. Thus, most of us now think of knowledge as bits of information, able to exist and be consumed apart from any training of the mind. We are programmed by our culture and social relations to see things as disconnected and fragmented. But in doing so, we lose whatever cultural power we might have. One of the most important ways that we will be able to make a difference in this day and age is if we have the ability to use knowledge (not just information) effectively to analyze the social world around us and to create cohesive arguments about what we as a society ought to be doing.

There are at least two other important differences between authoritative and personal opinions: critical thinking and theory. Getting back to our oncologist example, if you're smart, you'll not only choose the oncologist over Imus, but will also get the opinions of several oncologists. This tells us something important about the nature of knowledge, something that you may have already begun to notice in your college experience: There are very few "right" answers, and there certainly aren't any simple ones about things that matter. What becomes important, then, is not only what you know, but also how you use what you know, and how you use what you know is based on critical thinking. (*Theory*, as we'll see, is a special type of critical thinking.)

Critical Thinking Attitudes

Without a doubt, critical thinking is necessary for a democracy to work. But what do we mean by critical thinking? There are a number of ways the word *critical* can be used, and it's important to understand how it is meant here. Some of the synonyms for critical include dangerous, significant, life-threatening, unfavorable, and analytical. In critical thinking, we most specifically mean analytical. But critical thinking may end up being significant, dangerous, or unfavorable as well. Critical thinking doesn't accept all opinions and every piece of information equally. Thus, by definition, it will be unfavorable to some ways of knowing. Critical thinking can also end up being significant or dangerous, but, again, not because it is inherently so. Critical thinking may be significant or dangerous because it challenges everything; nothing is simply accepted or taken for granted.

Critical thinking involves sets of attitudes and skills, with the attitudes defining a specific kind of person. The most basic attitude is that *the critical thinker takes responsibility for his or her own knowledge.* Your path in education should move from schooling to scholarship. In schooling, you are presented with information as facts, and your job is to conform. This is the kind of education that is characteristic of kindergarten through high school in the

United States. In higher education, however, your disposition should change from "Will that be on the test?" to "How can I be sure of that?" And your skill set should change from memorization and categorization to research.

Further, *the critical thinker believes*. This belief, however, isn't in a final truth. In fact, that type of belief is antithetical to critical thinking and democracy. To believe in a final truth, especially about democracy, is to believe a myth. It is a form of what Judith Butler (1993) calls "presentist conceit" (p. 228)—the belief that despite the lessons of human history, we have somehow achieved truth and perfection in our moment in time. This myth "allows the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought" (John F. Kennedy, quoted in Shenkman, 2008, p. 1). Myths and beliefs are comforting; democracy and critical thinking are unsettling. Critical thinking is always questioning, always moving. The belief that critical thinking is based on is the modern faith in human potential, not absolute truth. And because of this belief, *the critical thinker is curious and hungry to know*. C. Wright Mills (1959) once wrote about the "passionate curiosity about a great problem, the sort of curiosity that compels the mind to travel anywhere and by any means, to re-make itself if necessary, in order to find out" (p. 103). The critical thinker is one who is driven to find out, and who believes in the processes of insight and discovery.

The critical thinker is purposeful and goal directed. Most of the thinking we engage in is on automatic pilot or just sort of a meandering of the mind. Critical thinking, on the other hand, is alive and searching. One of the reasons that critical thinking is purposeful is that two of our most cherished values—the ability to decide and the freedom to act—are based on it. Neither the ability to decide nor the freedom to act exists freely; both must be critically examined in order to exist at all. Deciding without examining the basis and context of that decision is in truth not a decision at all. Some things can appear as decisions when they are little more than compliance. And, by its very nature, action implies purpose; that's the distinction between acting and reacting. Purposeful, critical thinking is about scrutinizing your decisions and actions. Further, as we've seen from our early sociologists, democratic decisions and actions are intrinsically ethical. So part of our purposeful thinking must entail a consideration of our ethics: What ethics inform your decisions and actions?

The critical thinker is clear and systematic in using reason and analysis. Not only is critical thinking mindful behavior, it's also behavior that is logical and systematic. *The critical thinker is decidedly open-minded.* Having an open mind can be frightening. With it, we may come in contact with people and ideas that challenge our way of life. A closed mind is satisfied with its version of truth and is closed to all others. However, thousands of years of

human history should teach us one thing: We've always been wrong. To think we're right today and to be closed-minded is simply conceit. *The critical thinker is creative.* Critical thinking always sees beyond; critical thinking is driven to new insights. Critical thinking seeks to get out of the box. (A word to the wise: You must first know and understand the box in order to intentionally get out of it; otherwise, it's just an accident.) And, finally, *the critical thinker values thinking and is motivated to improve it.*

Critical Thinking Skills: The Basics

The fundamental critical thinking skill is the inclination and ability to ask questions—"we cannot be skilled at thinking unless we are skilled at questioning" (Elder & Paul, 2005, p. 3). Notice that there is both an attitude and a skill here. We must be inclined to ask questions as well as able to do so. Before going further, I have a side comment: Critical thinking is a valuable tool in almost every aspect of your life. You can use it to make decisions about what to buy, what classes to take, which news sources to listen to, and so on. My specific focus here will be on using critical thinking to understand arguments about society—what society is, how it works, and how we can be involved. But I also want to note that what you learn here about critical thinking will prove valuable in every other area of your life, because critical thinking attitudes and skills are generally the same. So practicing your skills here will prepare you to use critical thinking in your professional and personal lives as well.

Your first steps as a critical thinker involve asking **comprehension questions**, beginning with understanding the important ideas and concepts that are used by an author. You should read with a dictionary by your side, or use an authoritative online service like Merriam-Webster.com. Theory, however, uses a lot of specialized terms that can't be found in a standard dictionary. A word of caution: Some theoretical terms may appear to be in the dictionary. For example, you'll be able to find "religion," but the dictionary will not give you the theoretical definition of the concept. Most of the time, theoretical terms are defined in the particular text you are reading; even so, it's still a good idea to have and use reference books such as John Scott's *Sociology: The Key Concepts* (2006) or Allan G. Johnson's *The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology* (2000).

Theoretical terms need theoretical definitions, and they aren't as easy or simple as you might imagine. Let's use a common table to help us see. Any specific table is there for everyone to see and touch. We can assess it using a standard of measurement. So, we can say, "That table is 48 by 24 inches." (Of course, it changes to 121.92 by 60.96 centimeters if we use the metric system.) But a definition of *table* must be general enough to be used to classify

all tables, not just this one. Definitions describe ideas and concepts. How, then, do we know where the idea or category of table begins and ends? The only way to limit the idea of table is to specify it through a definition.

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

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

Sometimes definitions need to go further; this is especially true for **theoretical definitions**. One of the things that the Merriam-Webster definition includes is what a table does. When talking about tables, that doesn't seem all that interesting, but if we consider theoretical issues, its importance can more easily be seen. For example, the definition of *class consciousness* is the subjective awareness that class determines life chances and group interests. But what does class consciousness do? The answer is that class consciousness acts as one of the precursors to revolutionary social change. Another example is the definition of *money:* a generalized medium of exchange for goods and services. What does money do? Besides enabling you to buy things, money is actually one of the most powerfully acting forces in society. It creates higher levels of trust in government, trivializes meaning, increases

the number of rational rather than ethical relationships among people, stretches out social networks across time and space, increases the diversity and number of available commodities and markets, and so on. What I want you to see here is that, because theories explain how something works or comes about, *good* theoretical definitions will include variability and effects. *Variability* explains how this concept came to exist and how there could be more or less of it; *effects* explain what the concept does, what it creates. The bottom line is that the definitions you write must be able to perform work in a theory or argument.

Understanding the concepts being used is our important first step in critical thinking. However, concepts don't exist in a vacuum; a concept must always be understood within its context or argument. Part of comprehension, then, is discovering the argument: You don't truly understand the chapter, book, theory, or article until you comprehend the argument. Whether you realize it or not, every book, chapter, and article that you read for school is presenting an argument. In fact, almost everything we come in contact with—such as advertisements, newspapers, magazines, news broadcasts, and so on—implicitly or explicitly carries arguments. Defining an argument is easy: An **argument** is a course of reasoning presented to persuade the reader/hearer of a specific conclusion. While defining an argument is easy, writing good arguments and critiquing others take a great deal of practice, which is one of the aims of this book.

There are certain things that you need to find out about the arguments you read or hear. The first issue is *the question* or main point that's driving the argument. Ask yourself, what is this chapter or theory about? What question is the author answering? You should be able to find this in either the introduction or the conclusion. If possible, you also want to find the *author's purpose* in writing or doing the research. It isn't hard to imagine that an article written by a scientist employed by a chemical company will, perhaps, be biased, and the author's purpose will likely be connected to that company's goals. Part of what we see about arguments is that they are strongly influenced by the *perspective of the author*. So an argument that addresses self-esteem will be different if the person writing is a sociologist rather than a psychologist. Always search for the assumptions, perspectives, and possible biases in the writing.

These issues—questions, purpose, assumptions, and perspective—frame arguments. Arguments themselves always have a specific conclusion or intent and are built by *logically linking together different premises*. We can think of premises as ideas or facts that lead to a specific conclusion. Usually, you'll understand the premises by defining the main concepts. But there's more to understanding arguments than simply comprehending the

concepts and ideas. Arguments are specifically created through the way in which the concepts and premises are linked together. The ways that premises and concepts are related to one another form the structure of the argument or theory. This feature is extremely important, and the one with which most people have problems. To see the importance, consider this: What are the differences between 235 and 2 + 3 = 5? The numbers are the same, but they are structured differently and thus have entirely different meanings. As we'll see, this issue of how ideas or premises are put together is extremely important for theory.

Being able to evaluate and write arguments is paramount for critical thinking, because you must be able to give a full and coherent account of your thinking and reasoning; you must be able to *explain* your answer. Here's a simple example: Let's say you're in my theory course, and I ask you to write a theoretical definition of *class*. So you take a shot at it, and it sucks. You know it sucks; I know it sucks. So, I ask, "Can you make it better?" You say, "Yes." And I say, "How?" You then proceed to rewrite the definition—and that's where the problem begins. Let's say you write a better definition. It isn't hard with a definition that sucks. But *how* did you do it? What criteria did you use? Do you see the point? You may have an intuition you've picked up over your many years of schooling that you could use to make a definition better, but critical thinking demands that you be able to give an explanation—a full and lucid account of your thinking and reasoning, which always takes the form of an argument.

Critical Thinking Skill Set 1: Inference and Application

You don't fully understand concepts, arguments, or theories until you are able to apply them to the world around you. More importantly, civic sociology is dependent upon you doing just that—applying your knowledge of theory to the world around you. To *infer* is to derive by reasoning or implication, and by definition it is based on insight: Insight is seeing beyond or deeper than what is available on the surface. So always ask, what insights can be derived from this information, argument, or theory? How can I see the world differently because of this new knowledge? For example, in social theory, Émile Durkheim (1912/1995) gives a specific and unique definition of religion:

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (p. 44)

Thus, you can't infer Durkheim's definition of religion; he's already explicitly provided it. You can, however, infer from his definition. And using his definition of religion, you could deduce that sport in modernity is a form of religion.

Another example of an important but often neglected application question is at the core of citizenship and critical thinking: What are the implications of the things we believe and practice every day? One of the most difficult assignments I've ever given was to ask my "Sociology of Religion" students to examine the implications of their personal beliefs and practices. This was difficult because it asked students to (1) be reflexive, and (2) understand their individual lives in terms of social implications (e.g., to think sociologically). Also notice that inference assumes a thorough understanding of the ideas or practices at the core of the issue. In this case, the students had to understand the effects of religion generally in order to infer how their personal beliefs might impact society.

What's more, social theories must be applied to the social world. There are two areas here. First, theory is applied to the world through research methods. Theories aren't simply best guesses about how society works; they are meant to be tested over and over against empirical evidence. Each test sharpens our concepts and explanations. Empirical testing of theories is usually covered in research methods classes. But our theorizing may also be tested a second way. Rather than being tested against empirical evidence, critical theories are to be tested by the standard of social justice issues. This is where the value we place on our sociological work becomes important. If your purpose is to simply explain how society works, then applying the theory through research methods is all you need to do. On the other hand, if your goal is to change society, then the theory is also applied toward increasing social justice and equality; in short, theory can be applied to further the project of democracy.

Critical Thinking Skill Set 2: Interpretation, Analysis, Evaluation, and Synthesis

Your first jobs in critical thinking, then, are to discover the purposes and questions driving the author, comprehend the major concepts, find the argument (you'll see shortly that every theory is an argument), and think through the implications and social practices that the theory involves. After addressing these issues of understanding, there are several skills that move our thinking further ahead. The four skills in this set are nested within one another: Interpretation leads to analysis, analysis to evaluation, and evaluation to synthesis. **Interpretation** entails the ability to use diverse perspectives

to think about and question events, arguments, situations, and so forth. Our word *perspective* comes from the Latin *perspectus,* and it literally means "to look through." Perspectives act like glasses—they bring certain things into focus and blur our vision of others. All perspectives are built upon *assumptions*— things that we suppose to be true without testing them. There's an old saying that goes like this: When you assume, you make an Ass out of U and Me. That saying is dead wrong. Human beings can't begin to think, let alone act, without making assumptions. What makes an ass out of you and me is when we don't acknowledge and critically examine the assumptions underlying our knowledge and actions.

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

To analyze something is to break it down into its parts. **Analysis** thus implies ordering: In breaking something down into its constituent parts, we understand it in an ordered manner. On one level, this is something we do every day without even thinking about it. We analyze, order, and break down our time according to the idea of the week. Weeks don't exist in nature; the concept of "Monday" is simply a social convention that allows us to organize our behaviors in certain ways. Analysis in critical thinking is similar in that it is based on taking a given perspective. It may surprise you to know that the Egyptians, Chinese, and French at one time used a 10-day week and the Mayans a 13-day week, and most of these different orderings of time (including our own 7-day week) are based on different religious perspectives. Thus,

analysis always implies interpretation because it depends upon the use of a specific perspective in order to unpack something—how something is broken down into its parts, then changes depending on the way in which the thing is viewed. For example, human behavior looks very different if you use a sociological rather than a psychological perspective.

Having analysis in your critical thinking tool kit means that you take little if anything for granted—critical analysis begins by unpacking ideas and concepts that you take for granted. In sociology, your goal is to first understand the basic concepts of theory as well as social life. For example, what is gender? Is it genetic, or is gender an achievement of social interactions? Or perhaps gender is a function of social structures. You could ask the same kinds of questions about race, sexuality, religion, and so on. Analysis at this level begins with definitions: We're asking how gender, race, and religion exist— in answering, we're minimally stipulating the necessary characteristics to be such a thing (race, sexuality, etc.) and ideally how each concept varies and affects other issues.

Analysis usually leads to **evaluation**. Once we realize all analysis is interpretive to one degree or another, then evaluating the different analyses that diverse perspectives give is the next logical step. To evaluate means "to examine and judge concerning the worth, quality, significance, amount, degree, or condition of" (Merriam-Webster, 2002). Evaluation is always guided by perspectives and is preceded by analyses. It thus involves the capacity to compare and contrast the strengths and weaknesses of different definitions, theories, perspectives, arguments, information, and inferences, all of which are based on knowing the specific criteria in each perspective. Interpretation also involves evaluating the validity of your sources. For example, there are differences between the information available on the Internet and the knowledge found in research journals. You have undoubtedly run across this distinction in your college-level education, but do you know what those differences are? What makes certain kinds of knowledge better or more valuable? What criteria can be used in such an assessment?

Synthesis is creatively bringing two or more arguments or theories together to build a new, more robust whole. This is where your own personal work can really shine, because you're seeing something that the original authors did not. Synthesis begins with compare-and-contrast work and by analyzing and evaluating strengths and weaknesses of different theories, arguments, or information. This kind of work will lead you to see where one argument or theory may fit together with or complement another. All critical thinking skills and practices require explanation, but this is particularly true for synthesis—because this is your work! You will need to explain how these arguments or theories fit together, and you will have to convince

your reader of this good fit through argumentation. In fact, a synthesis is by definition an argument.

Critical Thinking and Self-Evaluation

Self-evaluation is the inclination and ability to observe, critique, and change one's own thinking and conclusions. While this is listed last, it is essential to what Browne and Keeley (2007) call strong-sense critical thinking: "Weak-sense critical thinking is the use of critical thinking to defend your current beliefs. Strong-sense critical thinking is the use of the same skills to evaluate all claims and beliefs, especially your own" (p. 10). Unless we subject our own thinking, knowledge, and beliefs to critical thinking, we run the risk of becoming dogmatic and a hindrance to true democratic energies. The criteria you use to evaluate your own thinking, at least initially, are the attitudes and skills of critical thinking we just reviewed. Here are some samples:

- What is my purpose in thinking about this information, argument, or theory?
- What are my assumptions and biases? How are these influencing how I read, analyze, and evaluate information, arguments, or theories?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses as a thinker and writer? Am I continually working with course material? Can I summarize the information/arguments/ theories to this point? Do I continually evaluate and understand the implications of my way of thinking and the knowledge I hold? Can I write cohesive and persuasive arguments?
- What questions drive my curiosity? Do I know how to ask questions of courses, textbooks, arguments, information, and theories? Can I formulate questions about a subject using the various issues in critical thinking (analysis, interpretation, evaluation and synthesis, inference, implication, insight, explanation)?
- Can I write strong definitions of concepts that provide all the necessary and sufficient information?
- What diverse perspectives am I able to use to ask questions of my social world and personal actions?
- What skills do I need to find out about something? Am I improving my research skills? Are there better tools or ways to use the tools I have?
- What criteria do I use to evaluate my learning and thinking? Can I explain their relevance?

Theory

Theory is at the heart of modern knowledge and science, yet there's a line in pop culture that says, "It's only a theory." The truth of the matter is that apart from tradition and religion, theory is all we have. All scientific

work is based on theory—science and technology in all its forms would not exist if it wasn't for theory. Theories aren't accepted on faith, nor are they time honored. In fact, the business of science is the continual attempt to disprove theories! Theories are accepted because they have stood up to the constant doubt and battering of scientists. Furthermore, "facts" are actually a function of theory: Scientific data is produced through testing and using theoretical perspectives and hypotheses. So, having "just a theory" is a powerful thing.

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

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

Theory is built out of assumptions, perspectives, concepts, and relationships. We've already talked about all of these building blocks. (As I said, theory is a special type of critical thinking.) Yet I do want to point out a couple of things. The general assumptions that theorists make are the ones we've already noted, about humans, society, and purpose or values. Keep these in mind as you go through the book; they'll be important for understanding the theories. There are many perspectives in sociology. Some of the ones we'll specifically cover are functionalism, symbolic interaction, dramaturgy, conflict theory, and critical theory. Each of these gives us a different way of seeing the social world and understanding our place in it. Assumptions and perspectives form the background work; actual theory is built out of concepts and

relationships. Theoretical concepts are abstract, which is why definitions are so important. The more abstract a concept, the greater its *explanatory power*. In other words, abstract concepts allow you to explain more things.

Because theory explains how something works or came into existence, it is built by proposing specific *relationships* among various concepts. There are at least two concerns in spelling out theoretical relationships. The first is the direction of the relationship. There are two basic possibilities, positive and negative. A relationship is positive if the concepts vary in the same direction (either both increase or both decrease); relationships are negative if they vary in opposite directions (if one increases, the other decreases). Let's use a simple example—education and occupation. The relationship between these two concepts is positive (at least, that's your working hypothesis for being in school): Increasing years of education will produce higher-rated jobs for the individual. Notice that because the relationship is positive, it works the same in reverse: Lower years of education produce lower-rated jobs.

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

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

The Craft of Citizenship	Modernity, Theory, and Citizenship

The Basics: Comprehension and Explanation

- Construct a table or list of the critical thinking and theoretical issues and questions that this chapter raises. Move from the most basic to the most difficult. This list will be a critical thinking "cheat sheet" that will be an aid to help you work through issues.

  ➤ *Helpful hints:* Such a list would begin with "Identify the central question" and end with "Synthesize this theory with others that address its weaknesses."

- What qualities go into making a theoretical definition, one that will work in a theory or argument? Put another way, what makes one definition theoretical and another not?
- Write a stipulative definition of modernity, paying particular attention to the type of knowledge.

  ➤ *Helpful hints:* In the chapter, the terms in **bold** are the important concepts, and *italicized* words are ideas that help explain the important concepts. So, go back to the place in the chapter where modernity is in bold and then pay particular attention to the italicized ideas that surround it. Caution: You can't simply list the italicized words—they are only signposts.

- List the basic assumptions of social/sociological theory.
- Using the information in this book and one other source, define *theory.*
- Using the information in this book and one other source, define *critical thinking.*
- Using the information in this book and one other source, define *democracy* and *citizenship.*

Skill Set 1: Inference and Application

- Explain the place and importance of education in democracy. What are the implications of this for the way in which you are involved in your own education? What place does education have in your country?
- All the work you do for school is graded using explicit criteria. These criteria are the standards against which your work is compared. Part of being a critical thinker is being able to self-evaluate. To that end, I'd like you to use the material from this chapter to write the grading criteria for a theory paper. Start your thinking by filling in the blank: "A good theory paper needs to be/have _____." Another way to stimulate your thinking is to answer this question: What makes one paper theoretical and another not? Come up with at least four criteria.

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- What does pragmatism infer about your democratic participation? Use Tocqueville's idea of the moral majority to analyze your democratic participation.

  - ➤ *Helpful hints:* Sometimes to answer one question you have to ask others. So, to answer these questions you must first ask, what is pragmatism and Tocqueville's idea of moral majority?

- What is civic sociology? What does the idea of civic sociology imply about your own practices and beliefs? In what ways do you use civic sociology?

Skill Set 2: Interpretation, Analysis, Evaluation, Synthesis

- Evaluate the following statement: "Without a doubt, critical thinking is necessary for a democracy to work."