

# What Is Sociology? - Definition, Themes & Careers in Sociology

What is sociology? This lesson covers a basic definition of the field, identifies major themes or questions studied by sociologists, and identifies possible careers in sociology. Learn about the main ideas within this popular and fascinating field!

## What Is Sociology?

Think about the major questions that we ask about our social world. Are men and women really that different? Why do we have problems such as racism? What motivates people to have social status and respect? These questions are hugely important to life as a human being, and they are studied by the field of sociology. A general definition of sociology is the systematic study of human society, culture, and relationships on a group level.

## Major Themes And Questions

The lessons within this sociology course cover many of the 'big picture' questions. Let's go over some of the issues that sociology covers as a field because these are the same issues that are covered by the sociology lessons you might watch.

First, sociology studies different ideas for what might create an ideal society. Some people believe that society should focus on making sure everyone is treated equally, including from an economic perspective. However, other people believe that an ideal society includes different social classes, because wanting to be rich motivates people to invent things and work harder. These questions include the study of how economics, politics, and culture combine in different ways.

Other questions sociology asks are, 'How is culture created, and how is it passed down from one generation to the next?' For example, what foods come from your country? If you're from the United States, our culture includes hamburgers and hot dogs. These food items are incorporated into other aspects of American culture, like when you eat a hot dog at a baseball game. So, how are children influenced by these cultural images, and how do different cultures result in different kinds of people and ideas?

Sociology also studies the similarities and differences among different types of people. Remember at the beginning of this lesson, we talked about whether men and women are really different. What about people of different races or ethnicities? How about rich people versus poor people? How is a grandmother different from a granddaughter?

Finally, sociology studies social institutions. Social institutions are major structures made up of groups or ideas that influence people's daily lives, views of the world, or integration into society. Examples of social institutions are religious groups, schools, political organizations, and families. How have all of these social institutions influenced your life? For example, did you go to a public school or a private school? Did you have a large family or a small family? Were your parents religious, and do you share those same beliefs?

## Lesson Summary

In summary, sociology is the systematic study of human society, culture, and relationships on a group level.

As a field, sociology asks many questions about how human groups and ideas interact with each other. For example, one aspect of sociology is the study of social institutions, which are major structures made up of groups or ideas that influence people's daily lives, views of the world, or integration into society. Examples are religion and schools.

Many careers exist within sociology, such as being a college professor or a clinical sociologist. However, sociology can benefit almost any career.

# Why Is Sociology Important? - Applications in Public Policy, Social Change & Personal Growth

How can theoretical and abstract ideas from sociology be used in the 'real world?' This lesson covers three applications of sociology. First, we'll discuss public policy, such as welfare. Second, we'll cover social change, including change in the economy, cities, and politics. Finally, sociology is applied to personal growth, including motivation and citizenship.

## Applying Sociology To Life

The field of sociology has a lot of big, abstract ideas about politics, economics, and how people grow and change over time. How do these big, abstract ideas translate into the real world and the lives of everyday people? How do they apply to your life?

This lesson will discuss three specific ways that sociology can be applied to the real world, and all three ways highlight why sociology is important to study and understand. The applications will be public policy, social change, and personal growth.

## Public Policy

Many sociologists focus their research on how the field can improve the lives of every individual in society. This often means that people are trying to see ways that the government or public institutions, such as schools, can change to promote equality for everyone. So, what are some examples?



Many government lobbyists and politicians debate the role of programs such as welfare and social security. These programs are funded by the tax dollars of every citizen in the country, but they only benefit certain groups of people. Is it fair for those funds to go only to certain groups? Do these groups 'deserve' this special treatment? What kinds of rules should go along with using government money?

The running of public school systems is a major public policy issue

Another example of public policy is how public school systems are run. How should neighborhoods be divided to make up school districts? What happens if a particular neighborhood is mostly made up of low-income families? That probably means that their tax dollars won't be as high, meaning that school won't have good equipment, computers, playground equipment, and so on. Is that fair? Should richer neighborhoods pay to increase the education of children in poor neighborhoods because an educated population eventually benefits the entire society? Sociologists have done studies comparing children who grew up in different neighborhoods and went to different schools to see if this early public environment really affects them in terms of future careers, crime rates, and so on.

These theoretical ideas are discussed by sociologists and examined in research projects. Sociologists have many interesting ways to view these questions and often can use findings from research studies to make their arguments stronger. What do you think about these questions?

## **Social Change**

Next, let's talk about how sociology is applied to social change, or how societies try to improve themselves over time. Sociology really started as a field as a result of three big changes in European society in the 18th and 19th centuries. What were these three big changes?

First, two hundred years ago there weren't really big factories in Europe. Most people either farmed their own land or had a small shop doing personal crafts, such as woodworking or running a forge. These small scale-shops were the original manufacturing shops, which means to make something by hand. However, over the last couple of centuries, societies have seen a huge increase in industrialized factories that mass-produce items. Sociology studies how big changes like this affect people. Factories completely change how we shop, what jobs are available, and the number of people who have a boss at work instead of owning their own business.

The second big social change relevant to sociology is the change from people mostly living in rural areas, so they could run a farm, to mostly living in big cities, where they can work for factories or big corporations. Do you live in a small town or a big city? Think about all the ways that affects your life. It probably changes whether you live in a house or an apartment, and whether you have a yard. What about traffic? Can you walk around at night and feel safe, or not? Is there a bus or metro system you can take to get to and from school or work? For example, sociology studies different crime rates in rural versus urban communities and tries to explain why we see differences.

Finally, the third big social change that applies to sociology is political change. Sociology studies how politics have changed over the last 200 or 300 years. In general, many societies have shifted from a class-based system, such as one with lords versus peasants, to one in which every person demands rights and representation. We can see two big examples of this in the American and the French Revolutions in the 1700s. Another example is how women in the United States worked toward earning the right to vote in the late 19th century. Sociology studies how people in different kinds of political systems are more or less happy with their government and how they see their country compared to others. How do you feel about your own country? Can you think of advantages and disadvantages to the political system you have? Would you like to be involved in political change?

## **Personal Growth**

The last application of sociology for this lesson is in the area of personal, individual growth. A man named John Macionis wrote a very popular textbook called 'Sociology,' in which he describes many over-arching themes within the field. In this book, he identifies four specific ways that sociology benefits people in our daily lives. So, let's go over these four ways.

First, Macionis says that sociology helps us think critically about whether we believe what our culture tells us to believe. For example, your culture might have a common religious perspective. Do you have the same faith as most other people in your culture? Have you really examined these beliefs to make sure you agree with them? Sociology encourages people to analyze messages from society and decide whether to agree with them or not.

Second, Macionis argues that sociology helps people see opportunities and challenges. Earlier, we talked about changing politics. Have you ever wanted to run for office? What are some things about your local community, school, or country you would like to change? These problems we can identify might be viewed as challenges, but the fact that we have the motivation and ability to change things also means that they can be viewed as opportunities.



Women earning the right to vote led to major political change in the U.S.

The third way Macionis says sociology can be applied to personal growth is by encouraging people to be active members of their society. For example, do you participate in voting? Maybe people argue that a single vote won't make a difference in an election. But what would happen if everyone decided not to vote? Sociology encourages people to really get involved in making decisions that will affect their own lives and the lives of people around them.

Finally, Macionis says that sociology helps people appreciate diversity and live in a diverse world. Many of the lessons on sociology you can find on this website cover questions of diversity, such as men versus women, people of different ethnicities, different sexual orientations, and different ages. While you fit into certain social categories, if you can appreciate and respect people who are different from yourself, then our entire society can get along better.

### **Lesson Summary**

In summary, sociology can be applied in many different ways to everyday lives and everyday people. This lesson discussed three applications: public policy, social change, and personal growth. As we went through examples, did some of them apply to you?

## **Herbert Spencer: Theory & Social Darwinism**

Herbert Spencer was one of the leading sociologists of his time and was an influencer of the structural-functionalist perspective. Learn more about the man who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest' and understand the positive and negative aspects of social Darwinism.

### **Spencer And The Theory Of Evolution**

The idea of something changing naturally isn't a new idea, but one that Charles Darwin explained with his theory of evolution. Herbert Spencer, an English sociologist, took Darwin's theory and applied it to how societies change and evolve over time. As a sociologist, Spencer did not feel the need to correct or improve society, for he felt that societies were bound to change automatically.

<b>SYSTEM</b>	<b>ANIMALS</b>	<b>SOCIETIES</b>
<i>Regulative System</i>	<i>Central nervous system</i>	<i>Government</i>
<i>Sustaining System</i>	<i>Giving/receiving nourishment</i>	<i>Industry (jobs, money, economy)</i>
<i>Distribution System</i>	<i>Veins and arteries</i>	<i>Roads, transportation, internet, etc.</i>

Spencer took the theory of evolution one step beyond biology and applied it to say that societies were organisms that progress through changes similar to that of a living species. It was Spencer's philosophy that societies (like organisms) would begin simple and then progress to a more complex form. Spencer also found similarities between animal organisms and societies in that both had three main systems.

Societies can be compared to organisms in that both have three main systems

The first system is the regulative system. In animals, that would be the central nervous system. In societies, it would be government that regulates everything. The second system is the sustaining system. For animals, that's the giving and receiving of nourishment. For societies, that would be industry - jobs, money, economy and those sorts of things. The third system would be the distribution system. In animals, that would be the veins and arteries. In societies, it would be roads, transportation, internet - anything in which information and goods and services are exchanged.

### Survival Of The Fittest

It was Herbert Spencer, not Darwin, who coined the phrase 'survival of the fittest' due to the fact that he believed human behavior was designed in a way that strives for self-preservation. Darwin later used the term 'survival of the fittest' in his edition of *Origins of the Species*.

The theory of social Darwinism created the thinking of the 'survival of the fittest' as that the strongest and the fittest should survive and flourish in society, and the weak should be allowed to die out. This allowed Spencer to believe that the rich and powerful became so because they were better-suited to the social and economic climate of the time. He believed it was natural or normal that the strong survived at the cost of the weak.

The negative side of believing in social Darwinism is the false concept that if something naturally happens then it is alright or good that humans do it as well. On the extreme side, this thinking is part of what led to the rise of the practice of eugenics with the Nazi party in Germany or the American eugenics movement of 1910-1930. On the positive side, social Darwinism led to the creation of programs that allowed deserving participants to receive resources that would help them change their dire circumstances.



Spencer believed that it was natural for the strong to survive at the cost of the weak

## Lesson Summary

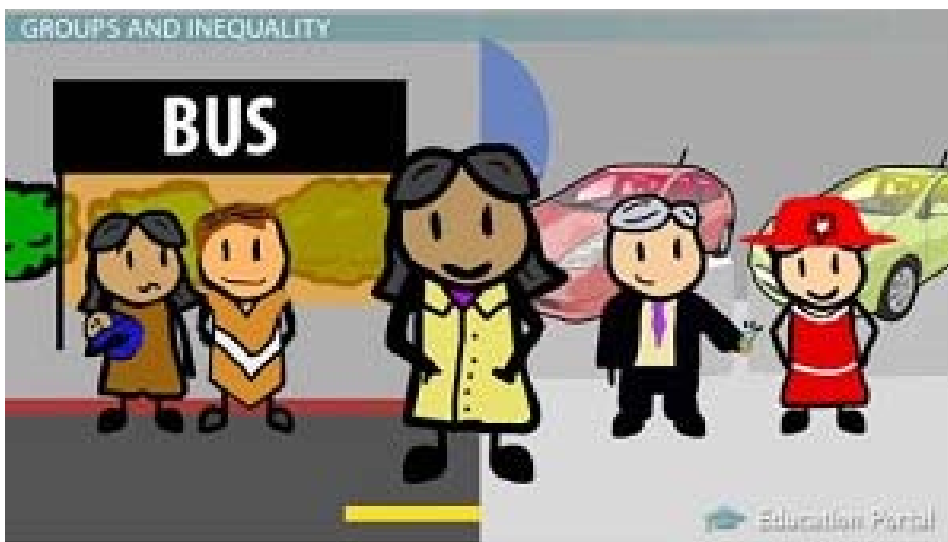
Spencer used Darwin's theory of evolution to help explain that society was like a living organism in that it will evolve and change over time. He even coined the term 'survival of the fittest' to explain how society was made up for the more powerful and strong to be in control and survive, while the weak would stay poor or even die.

Spencer was a major contributor to the structural-functionalist perspective in that he believed that society is made up of various structures that each have a function to do. If all structures are functioning correctly, then society runs smoothly. However, if one structure is not functioning correctly, then society as a whole is not stable. Herbert Spencer is known for his writing and as one of the greatest philosophical thinkers of his time.

## Karl Marx: Theory of Class Consciousness and False Consciousness

In this lesson, you will learn what Karl Marx meant by a society's having a class consciousness and a false consciousness. This lesson will also discuss how, according to Marx, these two elements can either help or hinder working-class members of a society.

### Groups And Inequality



Karl Marx viewed the world as groups who were either advantaged or disadvantaged

Do you see the world in terms of groups and of inequality? Groups where one is advantaged and one is disadvantaged? Groups where one has more and one has less? If you do, then you share a viewpoint with Karl Marx, a German economist whose works and ideas are studied and used by philosophers, historians, economists, sociologists and politicians. Marx's ideas were seen as so radical that he was perceived as an inspiration to revolutionists and a threat by leaders of state governments.

## The Consciousness Of A Class

Marx is one of the most important of all Socialist thinkers. One of his greatest sociological insights centered on the thought that social class was the deciding principle of social life. Much of his work focused on the plight of the working class, and he felt it imperative that the class structure of society be changed. In Marx's view, the relationship between people was determined primarily through who controlled the mode of economic production, such as land or factories. The land, resources and factories were controlled and owned by the wealthy citizens; thus, the working class had little choice but to work according to the terms dictated by the upper, controlling class. For this reason, Marx detested the concept and practice of capitalism; he felt that it only allowed the rich to become richer and the poor to become poorer.

### Class Consciousness - A Collective Whole

Marx saw the exploitation of the working class as a catalyst for change. He felt that the capitalistic system of the time could and should be destroyed, and Marx called for a revolution by the working-class members. However, before the revolution could occur, Marx felt that the working class first needed to develop what is known as class consciousness. This is a subjective awareness of common vested interests and the need for collective political action to bring about social change. Simply put, the workers needed to see themselves as one unit and, together, could revolt and change their working conditions.

Part of Marx's view of class consciousness was that the working class had to have one single vision: that of believing the wealthy were their oppressors. It was with the hope of this vision that Marx felt the working class would naturally rise up against the wealthy owners and demand equality. Actually, in Marx's purest thoughts, the revolution would destroy capitalism and governments, which would be replaced by a socialistic collective where all were equal in ownership and rewards of production.



Marx believed that through class consciousness, workers would stand up to their oppressors

### False Consciousness - The Concept Of 'I' And 'Me'

There was one stumbling block to Marx's hope of a working-class revolution, and that was the fact that the working class did not see themselves as one unit, but individually, in terms of 'I' and 'me.' This is known as false consciousness. A false consciousness is an attitude held by members of a class that does not accurately reflect their objective position. Basically, workers would see themselves as 'I,' as in 'I am being exploited by my boss,' rather than 'we:' 'We are being exploited by our boss.' Marx's revolution to end capitalism and bring down the wealthy controlling class would not come to light as long as the working class was viewing life through a false consciousness.



False consciousness is when class members view themselves as individuals rather than a single unit

### Lesson Summary

Karl Marx is one of the greatest Socialist thinkers of all time. His works and his ideas influence those in a variety of arenas, such as historians, economists, sociologists, political scientists and more. His writings were seen by many as radical, and he was expelled from his homeland of Germany and other countries throughout his life. Karl Marx felt that one's social class dictated one's social life and that those who owned the modes of production - land, resources, factories, businesses, etc. - would be the ruling social class, which controlled the lower working class.

Marx focused a great deal on the exploitation of the working class by the wealthier controlling classes of society. He had hoped for the working class to revolt against the ruling class to create a more equal collective-type society. However, before this could happen, Marx stated that the workers needed to overcome their false consciousness (their thinking in terms of 'I' and 'me') and reach a thinking of class consciousness (thinking in terms of 'we' and 'us').

Marx's revolutions did not occur on the grand scale that he had hoped for, but many of his economic theories are being proven, even in today's society. He is seen as one of the greatest contributors to the study of sociology.

## Karl Marx on Religion: How Religion Affects Social Inequality

This lesson will discuss Karl Marx's view of how religion is an 'opiate for the people' and perpetuates social inequality. It will discuss how Karl Marx believed that religion was a way for the poor to accept their poverty and for the wealthy to control the poor.

While Marx hoped for revolutions in large industrial countries, such as Britain and Germany, smaller ones occurred in Russia and China. Many factors that Marx did not foresee may be the very reason the revolutions did not occur - factors such as the development of labor unions and political ideologies teaching people that they controlled their destinies within their circumstances. Nor did Marx see the rise of Communism, which gave government complete control. To date, Marx's political vision has not been seen; however, his economic theory of the gap between the wealthy and the poor growing larger has never been more true than today.



## Religion And The Masses



Religion gives a reason for the poor to accept their plight in life

Thus far, we have learned about Karl Marx's views on social class, social inequality and the plight of the working-class people. According to Marx, society was seen as two classes: the rich and the poor. It was his belief that the social class structure of the time was set up to allow the wealthy to control all elements of production and to become wealthier off the labor of the working class. One theory believed by Karl Marx was that the capitalist system created a feeling of alienation for the workers (a feeling of powerlessness) and thus religion would be a means for workers to accept their plight in life. Religion would also be used by the wealthy to unconsciously control the masses, or the ordinary people.

### Religion: A False Truth

Marx understood that religion served a purpose or a function in society but did not agree as to the basis of that function. For most, religion is seen through faith or teachings that are held to be true. Religion teaches morality, values and beliefs that a society will hold its evaluation of behavior against. Marx had a hard time believing in unseen truths. The basis of his argument is that humans should be led by reason and that religion was masking the truth and misleading followers. He believed that when one views society and life through the lens of religion, they are blinded to the realities of their life. Religion, then, was a false hope and comfort to the poor. He saw the poor used their religion as a means to find comfort in their circumstances, thus aiding in the process of alienation.

### Religion: An Opiate For The Masses

Again, Marx did not believe in following a teaching that was based on faith. He actually felt that this amounted to simply believing in a superstition. 'If people are to know and understand the real world, they must give up superstitious beliefs because they have a narcotic effect on the mind,' said Marx. Marx believed that religion, like an opiate, gave a sense of security and salvation of something yet to come. However, he claimed this was all an illusion. He felt that religion taught individuals to focus on otherworldly concerns and not on the immediate poverty they were suffering. To quote Marx: 'Religion is ... a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.'



Religion gives people comfort in their circumstances

### Religion And Social Control

Marx believed that religion was a way to uphold a system of beliefs, ideas and norms of the wealthy capitalists, stating 'Religion was conceived to be a powerful conservative force that served to perpetuate the domination of one social class at the expense of others.' Basically, Marx felt religion was a means to oppress the lower working-class individuals. It was

religion that perpetuated social inequality by reinforcing the interests of those in a position of power. Religion, therefore, was a system for the rich to keep getting richer and the poor to remain forever poor according to Karl Marx.

### Lesson Summary

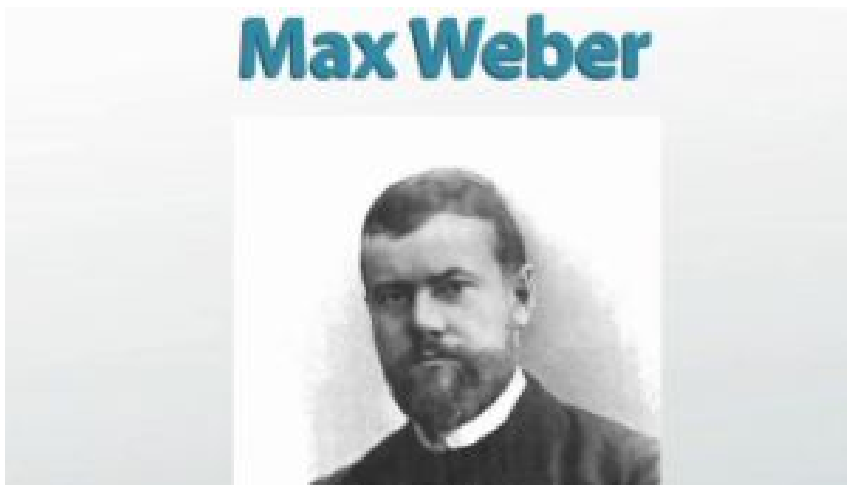
Karl Marx was a German economist whose study of the plight of the poor working-class has had considerable impact on sociology and the study of social class. He saw the world as two classes: the rich and the poor. Religion, therefore, was a system of illusions and superstitions that perpetuated social inequality by reinforcing the beliefs and practices of the wealthy capitalists. He believed that religion only taught the poor to accept their current conditions in life while at the same time focusing on a 'better world to come' and that religion was a 'powerful conservative force that served to perpetuate the domination of one social class at the expense of others.'

## Bureaucracy: Max Weber's Theory of Impersonal Management

At a time when organizations were run like families, Max Weber looked for ways to bring a more formalized structure to organizations. Weber created the idea of bureaucratic management where organizations are more authoritative, rigid and structured. This lesson will describe the development of bureaucracy and common characteristics of bureaucratic organizations.

### The Development Of Bureaucracy

In the late 1800s, Max Weber criticized organizations for running their businesses like a family, or what some of us might refer to as 'mom and pop'. Weber believed this informal organization of supervisors and employees inhibited the potential success of a company because power was misplaced. He felt that employees were loyal to their bosses and not to the organization.



Max Weber believed in a more formalized, rigid structure of organization.

Weber believed in a more formalized, rigid structure of organization known as a bureaucracy. This non-personal view of organizations followed a formal structure where rules, formal legitimate authority and competence were characteristics of appropriate management practices. He believed that a supervisor's power should be based on an individual's position within the organization, his or her level of professional competence and the supervisor's adherence to explicit rules and regulations. To better understand the idea of bureaucracy, let's look at some of its characteristics.

### Characteristics Of Bureaucratic Organizations

A well-defined formal hierarchy and chain of command distinguishes the level of authority within an organization. Individuals who hold higher positions will supervise and direct lower positions within the hierarchy. For example, Megan the Manager supervises a team of four sales representatives. Megan's position within the organization as a supervisor

gives her authority over those four sales representatives to direct and control their actions to ensure organizational goals are met.

Management by rules and regulations provides a set of standard operating procedures that facilitate consistency in both organizational and management practices. For example, when an employee is sick and cannot make it into work that day, he or she must call out to their direct supervisor. If one of Megan's sales reps is sick, they are expected to call her directly to inform her of their absence. Any employee who fails to do this will be subject to termination. All of Megan's employees are expected to follow this rule, and Megan is expected to enforce this rule equally among her employees.

Division of labor and work specializations are used to align employees with their organizational tasks. This way, an employee will work on things with which he or she has experience and knows how to do well. For example, let's say two of Megan's sales reps are experienced in selling products to vendors in the western region of the state due to their extensive experience working in that area. Megan would then put those two employees in charge of that specific region and would place the other two sales reps in the eastern region.

Managers should maintain an impersonal relationship with employees to promote fair and equal treatment of all employees so that unbiased decisions can be made. This is not to say that Megan should not be friendly with her employees; rather, Megan should be professionally friendly with her employees and work to maintain a clear separation between business and pleasure. For example, Megan should refrain from spending time outside of work with her employees. While it is acceptable for the four sales reps to meet up after work for happy hour and have a drink, Megan should excuse herself from participating in such an occasion.

Competence, not personality, is the basis for job appointment. An employee should be chosen, placed and promoted within an organization based on his or her level of experience and competency to perform the job. For example, if Megan found room for a fifth sale rep on her team, she should look to recruit and place a new sales rep based on a person's ability to successfully perform the duties of the position. Hiring someone she is friends with, for example, would be a poor decision by Megan, as there is no guarantee her friend is a competent sales rep.

Formal written records are used to document all rules, regulations, procedures, decisions and actions taken by the organization and its members to preserve consistency and accountability. A policy and procedures manual is a good example of formal records.

### **Lesson Summary**

To review, Max Weber disliked the idea of managing an organization informally. He believed in a much more rigid, formalized structure known as a bureaucracy. The characteristics of a bureaucracy include: 1) A well-defined formal hierarchy and chain of command; 2) Management by rules and regulations; 3) Division of labor and work specialization; 4) Managers should maintain an impersonal relationship with employees; 5) Competence, not personality, is the basis for job appointment and 6) Formal written records.

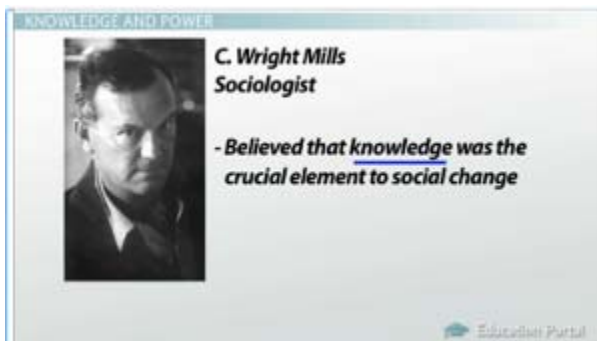
## **C. Wright Mills: Sociological Imagination and the Power Elite**

This lesson discusses the sociologist C. Wright Mills and his view on the power elite and the sociological imagination. In this lesson, you will also discover what the term sociological imagination means and how it relates to social issues.

## Knowledge And Power

C. Wright Mills was a sociologist who believed that knowledge was the crucial element to social change. He was a hugely influential, radical social theorist. One example of his works, which supports this distinction, is his legendary book on social power. In 1964, the Society for the Study of Social Problems established the C. Wright Mills Award. This award is given to the individual whose work 'best exemplifies outstanding social science research and a great understanding of the individual and society in the tradition of the distinguished sociologist, C. Wright Mills.'

He felt society needed to change - and that change would come through those who had knowledge and used it properly. He felt that critical thinking was the means of obtaining this crucial knowledge and, thus, used this thinking to create what he called the sociological imagination.



C. Wright Mills was a social-conflict theorist

### The Power Elite

C. Wright Mills was a social-conflict theorist who argued that a simple few individuals within the political, military and corporate realms actually held the majority of power within the United States and that these few individuals made decisions that resounded throughout all American lives. To look at an example of the hierarchy of power, imagine a triangle with the executive branch, military leaders and corporate leaders at the top; interest group leaders, legislators and local political leaders in the middle; and, then, the common masses (the everyday people) at the bottom.

Mills wrote *The Power Elite*, identifying certain individuals as the 'national upper class' that own most of the country's wealth, run its banks and corporations, are in control of the universities and mass media and staff some of the highest ranking positions within government and courts.

Mills further explained that these elites often move fluidly between positions within the three controlling realms. For example, Hillary Clinton moved from the position of first lady to that of senator to secretary of state. Mitt Romney moved from the corporate world to governor and even presidential candidate. Mills noted that these power elite usually were people who interacted with each other regularly and typically held the same political and economic views or agendas.

Many power elite theorists actually argue that there is not such a thing as a true democracy because these few individuals have so much power that the wishes of the average people cannot be heard. These theorists believe that those at the top are so distant from the average people and that they are so powerful that there isn't any true competition for them. Thus, they usually tend to get what they want.

## Lesson Summary

C. Wright Mills was a social-conflict sociologist who studied the power structure within the United States. In his work *The Power Elite*, Mills explained how just a few individuals within the government, military and corporate worlds held most of the wealth and power within the country.

He stated that due to these power elite, the average people within the United States were simply not in true control as taught to us according to democracy. Many theorists believe that the United States does not have a true democracy simply because of the great power held within the select power elite few.

Mills also believed that knowledge was the key to promoting social change. He believed it is the job of all social scientists to connect individual problems with greater social issues in order to create changes that would solve the problems.

Mills coined the term sociological imagination, which means awareness between one's self and the broader social world around them. Mills believed that when a link or connection was found between individual problems to greater social issues, one could better understand their own lives and social change could come about to create a better society.