

# CHAPTER 1

## PROLOGUE: VALUES AND PERSPECTIVES

*Final draft July 2009*

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This Book revolves around three broad kinds of questions:

- What *kind* of society is this?
- How does it really *work*? Why is it the way it is?
- In what ways does it *need changing* and how can those changes be brought about?

The first of these questions is largely *descriptive*. In order to know what kind of society this is we will have to compare it with other societies and describe its central institutions. This will involve both identifying some of the things which make the United States a very specific social world, but also things that it shares with other contemporary societies.

The second question is more *analytical and theoretical*. Our job will be to explain a range of attributes of American society, not simply describe them. We will “open up the black box” of various institutions and see how they work, what consequences they have. To do this we will have to present some of the key elements of social scientific theory drawn from sociology, political science and economics.

The third question is heavily *ethical and political*. It involves coming to terms with values and visions of the moral standards that should be embodied in American society. Answering this question will inevitably be highly charged politically and morally, since there are sharply contending moral standards by which social institutions can be judged. What we hope to do is clarify as best we can the implications for such moral and political issues of the existing realities of American Society.

Writing a book on contemporary American society poses an interesting challenge since in order to grow up and live in a society people have to learn a great deal about how it works, about the rules of the game, about the nature of the society in which they live. Most of the readers of this book, therefore, already know a great deal and are at least amateur experts already on the subject matter. In the ordinary course of experiencing the social world, everyone develops theories, even if they are partial and incomplete, about why things are the way they are. Everyone who has lived their lives in the United States therefore has ideas about what kind of society this is, and explanations for many specific questions we will explore in this book:

- Why is poverty a persistent problem in the USA?
- Why is there a consensus among the major political parties that taxes should be kept relatively low?
- Why does money seem to have so much influence in American politics?
- Why there are so many fewer women than men professors, corporate presidents and politicians?

- Why do cities find it so hard to control urban sprawl?
- Why does the American military engage in military actions in so many far-flung places around the world?

Some of the popular explanations for these things and our explanations for these things will differ a great deal. Some people, for example, believe that poor people are poor mainly because they are lazy or stupid, whereas we believe that a fundamental part of the explanation for enduring poverty in a rich society like the United States lies in the ways that key institutions protect the advantages of relatively privileged people and perpetuate the deprivations of others. The special challenge of writing a book about contemporary American society is that we will inevitably confront strongly held beliefs by many readers which we believe to be incorrect. Our task, therefore, is not simply to impart a body of information about contemporary American society, but to argue for a particular way of understanding and explaining the facts we present.

While we will do our best to approach these problems in as an objective manner as possible, we also believe that the kinds of questions we ask and the broad approach we adopt is shaped by our values. We feel it is only fair to readers to lay our cards on the table from the very outset by elaborating the core values that animate our work.

### Four values

The agenda of this book is shaped around four core social values that most people in American society affirm in one way or another: **economic efficiency, freedom, fairness, and democracy**. In the most general terms, here is what we mean by each of these values:

- *Economic efficiency* – The idea that the economy should generate rational outcomes, effectively balancing costs and benefits in the way resources are used.
- *Freedom* – The idea that people should be able to live their lives, to the greatest degree possible, as they wish. This means people should be free from coercive restrictions imposed by others and as much as possible have the capacity to put their life plans into effect.
- *Fairness* – the idea that people should be treated justly and that they should have equal opportunity to make something of their lives without unfair privileges and unfair disadvantages.
- *Democracy* – the idea that our public decisions should reflect the collective will of equal citizens rather than of powerful and privileged elites.

Most people in American society value these things and most people would agree that it is reasonable to judge our institutions in terms of how well they achieve these values. These are not the only values that people feel are important for evaluating social institutions – we can all easily name others, for example the value of community or a sense of belonging. And from time to time, other values will figure in our discussions. But most of the discussion will revolve around these four.

### Kinds of Disagreements

Now, while in very general terms most people affirm these values, there are sharply different ideas about how well American society lives up to them. Much of the debate between the left and the right of the political spectrum, between liberals and conservatives, in fact, centers on such disagreements. These disagreements tend to be of four main sorts:

First, people disagree about precisely *what is meant by each of these values*. Consider democracy. Does democracy simply mean “majority rule” or does it mean active involvement of citizens in political participation, public discussion and decision-making? Or take fairness: is fairness just a question of removing various forms of direct discrimination against people, for example, discrimination based on race or gender or religion, or does fairness mean that everyone really has an equal opportunity in life, which would mean drastically reducing economic disadvantages some people face?

Second, people disagree in their assessment of *the actual performance of our institutions*. Conservatives, for example, generally believe that the American style market economy is a wonderful machine for generating efficient, rational economic outcomes; liberals point to lots of irrationalities, waste and inefficiencies generated by markets.

Third, people disagree about *the relative priority of different values*. For example, while liberals and conservatives believe in both value of freedom and fairness, among liberals when there is a conflict between these principles, there is a tendency to give greater weight to fairness, whereas conservatives tend to be more concerned with individual freedom than fairness. Thus liberals are generally willing to increase taxation on the wealthy in order to fund programs that might reduce economic disadvantages of the poor and thus increase fairness, whereas conservatives are more likely to say that it is unfortunate that the poor have the disadvantages but it would be too much of a restriction of freedom to tax the rich.

Fourth, people disagree about *how much things could really be improved*. Thus, conservatives may acknowledge that American democracy may fall far short of the ideal of government of the people, by the people and for the people, but they tend to feel that there is not much that can be done about this, or, even more pessimistically, that efforts to improve things generally make things worse, whereas liberals believe that American democracy could be revitalized with appropriate institutional change.

Overall, then, conservatives tend to believe that American society measures up pretty well with respect to these particular values, and where it does not, there is not a lot that could be done to improve things, whereas liberals are much more critical of the existing reality and feel that much could be done.

### **Our views about realization of these values in contemporary America**

We place ourselves on the left of the political spectrum. We feel that American society has tremendous potential, but that it falls far short of what it could be. And specifically, in terms of these values we believe the United States does not measure up anywhere near as well as it could:

- *Efficiency*: While the American market economy is highly productive and innovative, it also generates pervasive irrationalities and inefficiencies because it is not subjected to sufficient social regulation. Examples which we will discuss include environmental degradation, health care failures, inadequate job training, and wasteful and inefficient transportation systems.

- *Freedom*: While compared to most societies in the past, and many other contemporary societies, people do have a great deal of individual freedom in the United States, the large inequalities in material conditions of life, the existence of significant levels of poverty especially among children, and the excessive emphasis on using resources for private consumption rather than public goods curtails the real freedom of many people.
- *Fairness*: While certain oppressive forms of discrimination have been reduced in recent decades, we remain a society which provides far from equal opportunity for its citizens. In particular, the levels of wealth and income inequality in the United States today generate massive unfair privileges and disadvantages which interact with continuing advantages and disadvantages linked to race and, to a lesser extent, gender.
- *Democracy*: The rules of the game of elections in the United States, especially when combined with the pervasive role of money in generating access to the political system, have profoundly undermined American democracy.

To push forward these values, then, means confronting the basic institutions of our society and trying to change them. If we really want to realize these values in practice we must aspire to more than simply tinkering with our social institutions, but strive for fundamental change.

This vision has deep roots in American culture. The values of democracy, freedom, economic rationality, and fairness have been a central part of struggles that have marked American history even while the realization of these values has been crippled and deflected by the nature of power, property and privilege in this society. The political perspective which animates this book is not a rejection of American values, but rather seeks to realize the great promise for humanity and justice that is part of the American dream.

## THINKING SOCIOLOGICALLY ABOUT AMERICAN SOCIETY

This is a book of sociology, and many readers may wonder “what is sociology?” Well, there are many answers to this question and we won’t try to present a general review of the alternatives here. But it may be helpful to give a rough sketch of what it means to study something “sociologically”. Here is one way to understand this: The myriad of actions in which we as conscious, choosing persons engage are *governed by rules*. However, unlike the rules of nature which govern the motions of the planets, these are rules which are changed by the actions they regulate. Our activities are rule-governed, but also our activities produce and transform the rules that govern those activities. Sometimes the changes in social rules are the result of *deliberate* actions by people – as when we change a law; sometimes rules change as the *unintended consequence* of actions. The central task of sociology is to understand how rules generate their effects, how people respond to the rules within which they live, and how the rules change over time. This may all seem trivial and obvious, but it is also quite profound. And it turns out to be a very complex matter indeed to figure out how these rules work and how, out of their interactions, the social facts we observe get produced.

There are many different ways that sociologists and other social scientists approach the problem of studying social rules, their consequences, their interactions, and their development. And while the debates in social science are not always framed precisely in these terms, many of the disagreements revolve on how rules are understood and studied. In very general terms, the

analysis of this book revolves around six basic aspects of the problem of understanding social rules and how they work.

1. *Rules are enforced.* There are consequences for breaking rules. If you dress badly for a job interview, you are unlikely to get the job; if you steal from a store, and get caught, you get arrested. The enforcement is variable: some rules are consistently and systematically enforced; others loosely and erratically enforced. But to call something a social rule means that there is some kind of enforcement connected to it.

2. *Varieties of Rules.* There are very different kinds of rules. Among the most important types are *laws* and *social norms*. Norms include morally weighty principles, like telling the truth, but also things like dress codes and rules of civility. Some of these rules are enforced by officials and authorities, others are enforced informally. And when they are internalized, we often enforce them on ourselves. The fact that a social rule is incorporated deeply into our habits and preferences, and that a significant part of their enforcement is self-administered (through guilt, shame, a feeling of awkwardness, and the like), does not mean that they cease to be rules.

3. *Rules are frequently not neutral.* Many rules benefit some people over others, and some kinds of rules impose real harms on some people. This idea is obvious in some contexts. In sports the rules of game give advantages to some sorts of people over others. Consider the height of basketball nets. But it is also true in society: many of the “rules of the game” that govern our economic, social, and political interactions give advantages to some kinds of people over others. Of course, not all rules strongly benefit some people over others. The social rules that tell us on which side of the road to drive benefit everyone. But many important rules do serve the interests of some people over others, and understanding such rules will be a major concern this book.

4. *Power and Rules.* Rules are protected by power, but this power is also governed by rules. People who strongly benefit from an existing set of rules will try to defend those rules. *Social rules will tend to be stable when they confer power on the people they benefit.* This is one of the central problems in sociological analysis. In some situations this point is obvious. In the American South before the Civil War the rules of economic life enormously benefited slave owners at the expense of slaves. The rules were enforced coercively by the Southern state. And slaveowners, who benefited from those rules, used their power to defend the rules. For a very long time these rules were stable precisely because they conferred power on those actors who had the greatest interest in defending them.

5. *Inconsistency of rules.* The rules that make up a society need not be coherent or consistent. Some rules contradict others and in general it is impossible to fully follow every social rule. Societies are not like a finely tuned machine in which all of the parts must fit together smoothly for the machine to work. In many social contexts people muddle through coping as best they can with contradictory pressures generated by inconsistent social rules. The social norms that govern the way men and women are supposed to behave, for example, are quite inconsistent with the rules that govern how you get ahead in a career, and many women experience this inconsistency as a source of considerable strain in contemporary American society.

6. *Change of rules.* Because of these inconsistencies and contradictions, rules can become quite unstable. There are historical moments when rules of the game are contested, and very rare moments when they are contested in a fundamental way. More often rules change by gradual erosion and metamorphosis.

So, to understand different aspects of social life what we need to do is figure out the rules, understand how they work, how they are enforced, how they fail to be enforced, how they fit together or fail to fit together, who benefits and who suffers, and what processes may be generating change in the rules. This is what we will be doing throughout this book.