Chapter 1
Society as the Walls of Our Imprisonment

Society, wrote sociologist Peter Berger (1963:92) in his classic *Invitation to Sociology*, "antedates us and it survive us....In sum, society is the walls of our imprisonment in history." The first half of Berger's book leads the reader to a view of sociology as a "dismal science" that gives us an image of society as a "forbidding prison." At this point, he feels obliged to ask whether there are some escape tunnels from this "gloomy determinism" (Berger, 1963:93). But before he can explore this possibility, he tells us he must "deepen the gloom a little more." This suggests that our situation as prisoners is more profound than we can imagine, escape tunnels or not. Unfortunately, while there are escape tunnels, as we will see in Chapter 13, our situation is gloomier than even Berger imagined.

The subtitle of Berger's book is "a humanistic perspective." This is meant to underscore Berger's understanding that sociology is scientific, but not scientistic. That is, he wants to ensure that we

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pursue our science of sociology without exaggerating or believing uncritically in the power of scientific knowledge and techniques. Thomas and Znaniecki (1918/1996) introduced humanistic sociology in their classic *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*. Scientism can blind us to the fact that sociology is ultimately a science of the human condition, a science that touches on the human passions. We are encouraged to draw on all the most sophisticated methodologies, mathematical tools, and research technologies of the sciences, but to use them in a civilized manner that ties sociology to the humanistic tradition of intellectual liberation (Berger, 1963:169). I will depart from Berger in two ways: I will paint a gloomier picture of society as the walls of our imprisonment. At the same time, I will go further than Berger in my commitment to a civilized liberatory science. Berger (1963:176) concludes his book by raising once again the image of society as a puppet theater. He claims that we can unravel the logic of this theater, locate ourselves, and see ourselves as puppets. Unlike real puppets, we can stop our movements, look to see the machinery moving us, and take the first steps to freeing ourselves from the machinery.

Is this true? Can we "perceive the machinery" and free ourselves from the walls of our imprisonment? Although Berger did not have formal theological credentials, his work in defense of Christian ethics and religious studies gave his sociology a theological slant at odds with my understanding of sociology as a fully secular discipline. Berger's theological perspective may help explain why his vision of society, the walls of our imprisonment notwithstanding, was more hopeful than mine.

The basic objective of this book is to tell the story of what the science of sociology has to tell us about who and what we are. We are used to hearing about ourselves, our personalities, our characters from biologists and neuroscientists who understand us in terms of genes and neurons. Psychologists are closely aligned with them, and they are the scientists we listen to most when we go searching for who and what we are. Psychologists study us as individuals, picking us out from the crowd and weighing us, measuring us, and otherwise probing us in accordance with the myth of individualism. Physicists

weigh in based on the myth that physics can explain anything and everything. Chemists tell our story in terms of hormones and the chemicals that course through our bodies. And theologians tell us that we have souls – that we are beings made by and in the image of a god. However, since the 1840s, sociology and its cousin sciences anthropology and social psychology have been revealing the role of society in fashioning our behavior, our emotions, and our thoughts. In spite of some resistance to the claims of sociology and to its standing as a science, it has been an academic subject for almost 200 years and is part of the curriculum in most universities and colleges and some high schools in the United States and abroad.

Standard textbooks introduce students to society as a set of standard institutions (e.g. economy, polity, military, family, and religion) and stratified by factors such as race, class, sex, and gender. Students learn how these institutions work and their place in the social structure. The most conservative texts tell you that you should "know your place," that is, accept your station in life. They might offer an explanation (and perhaps a justification) for why societies are structured the way they are and why you are sexed, gendered, raced, and classed. The more liberal and more radical texts offer critical assessments of social institutions and give you reasons and tools for criticizing, rebelling against, and changing societies characterized by social inequalities and social injustices. My book focuses on what sociology teaches us about the individual, the person reading this book, in the context of a society ruled by social inequalities and social injustices and a world challenged by existential threats.

Sociology is about how society shapes our being and behavior, who and what we are. There are many books, therefore, that deal with this fact about our lives. They overlap with each other, just as physics, chemistry, and biology texts overlap with each other. Each represents the core ideas of its disciplines in slightly different ways. For example, Callero (2023), like me, challenges the assumption that our behaviors are the result of free choices made by free-willing agents. Callero devotes an entire chapter to how the power of the state shapes our lives in visible and invisible ways. He also

treats race and social media and their impacts on our behavior. He discusses the ways in which cultural symbols, group conformity, family, social class, and global capitalism operate as walls of our imprisonment.

The distinction between sociology and anthropology is not always clear-cut. Some university departments are devoted to both disciplines; some treat them in separate departments. It is impossible to separate my own training and education in sociology from my training and education in anthropology. Don't be surprised, then, if you see some anthropologists sprinkled in among the sociologists I introduce in this book. Social psychologists stand astride sociologists and psychologists, some leaning toward one discipline more than the other. Their work may show up here, too.

I may exaggerate the distinctions between sociology and other social sciences in the interest of communicating sociological principles. In practice, these distinctions are easily blurred. Disciplines are more historical accidents than natural kinds. Their subject matters are generally natural kinds. A natural kind is a category of things that reflects the structure of the natural world, rather than human interests. This is a difficult distinction to sustain since our explorations of the natural world are driven by our interests. But the distinction can be sustained if we understand science as a collective historical undertaking rather than one based on individual scientists.

On the Concept of Natural Kinds in Science

Scientists are charged in part with identifying natural kinds and theorizing about those kinds. To say that a kind is natural is to say that it corresponds to a grouping that reflects the structure of the natural world rather than the interests and actions of human beings. We tend to assume that science is often successful in revealing these kinds; it is a corollary of scientific realism that when all goes well, the classifications and taxonomies employed

by science correspond to the real kinds in nature. The existence of these real and independent kinds of things is held to justify our scientific inferences and practices. Chemistry provides what are taken by many to be the paradigm examples of natural kinds, the chemical elements. Natural kinds in the social sciences, such as economics or sociology, are more problematic since the changing norms and practices of individuals and societies may also be held to be constitutive factors in kind membership, and these norms and practices may themselves respond to our classification of people and relationships into kinds. These examples are troublesome because there is some tension between the existence of kinds and the mutability of the particulars, which are supposed to fall under those kinds. In the case of atoms or galaxies, the particulars under study are typically long-lived and only slowly changing; viruses and economic structures, on the other hand, are more dynamic. But dynamics should not be a barrier to defining kinds; sometimes change is an inherent characteristic of a natural kind. This is true to varying degrees across the sciences. The more complex the subject matter of a science, the more dynamic its natural kinds will be. Once we establish that society is a scientific concept (more on this below), the science of society will identify society's natural kinds. The complexity of identifying kinds is increased by the fact that it is human beings in social contexts trying to identify kinds and label, name, and classify them with language and numbers. This suggests that all kinds are socially constructed. And indeed this is the case and explains why we can never know "the thing in itself."

The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that we can only know things as they appear to us, shaped by our senses and the structures of our understanding (like space and time). The "thing-in-itself" (*Ding an sich*) is the underlying reality that exists beyond these limitations, something we can't directly access or know. The sociological version of this philosophy is that our world is socially constructed, and knowledge is a matter of exploring how the nature and limits of our behavior give us hints about the world as it exists independent of our perceptions. We can know

reality in practice but not reality in itself. This is a matter of the match between our sensory apparatus and the reality it is able to access. Technological prosthetics (for example, microscopes and telescopes) can expand the range of our access.

The Road to Sociology

The perspective in this book is driven by the forces that led me to sociology. There is a memoir – a sociobiography – that serves as the subtext in this book. It becomes explicit when I introduce my personal reflections on who and what I am, always in the context of my being an exhibit of the sociological imagination in action. Sociology had a profound influence on me as a college student. It helped give meaning to my life and eventually led me to an economically sustaining profession that was not so much work as a way of life, a calling.

Sociologists argue that the following questions are more appropriately addressed by sociologists than by philosophers and psychologists. If they were once the province of philosophy, psychology, and theology that is no longer true, these are now questions for, in the broadest sense, the social sciences. What is a human being, what is "the self," what role does social life play in shaping our personalities and character, our emotions, the very ways in which we think, and how do genes and neurons, hormones and other chemicals, and physics matter here? The reason these are sociological questions follows from an evolutionary fact: humans arrive on the evolutionary stage as the most radically social of the social species. They are more radically social than their closest relatives, the nonhuman primates, and differently social than bees, ants, and other social insects (Wilson, 2011).

Humans are always, already, and everywhere social. Primordial humans did not engage in a war of all against all that ended when they agreed to a "social contract." Humans arrived social through and through. Society and culture shape us into individuals but individuals who never lose their species-specific social nature.

Culture can fracture our evolutionary social heritage and bind us to a myth of individualism that supports illusions about free will and agency. It can undermine compassion and empathy. Cultural evolution has become more important than genes and neurons in shaping who and what we are, a fact increasingly recognized by biological scientists and social scientists. Culture has contradictory dialectics that allows it on the one hand to support our evolutionary socialness via social institutions while at the same time demonstrating a capacity to fracture our socialness. This is a function of culture's role in complexifying our social relationships and thereby enhancing conflicting and contradictory social forces. But we're getting ahead of ourselves here.

The reader will encounter the sociological way of thinking progressively. Before we begin our exploration of sociology's essentials, it is important to establish its credibility as a science. While sociology's reputation as a science has been improving, there are still many scholars, intellectuals, and politicians who question its status as a science. However, it is recognized as a science worthy of societal support by the US National Science Foundation and by many private and public funding agencies around the world. There are still skeptics, even in the US Congress, who would like to cut funding for what they see as a pseudo-science, common sense disguised as science. This offers an overview of the rationale for and plan of the book. Chapter 2 addresses the question "Is sociology a science?" by answering the question, "What is science?" from the perspective of the sociology of science. I introduce the rationale for considering sociology one of the core sciences alongside physics, chemistry, and biology (and arguably economics and psychology). We will then turn to stretching and warm-up exercises, prior to diving into the details of the sociological imagination. This involves learning the concise history of sociology from its ancient precursors to its founders in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and then to the contributions of some of the key sociologists of our time. This is achieved in Chapters 3 and 4.

Chapter 5 offers an integration of basic concepts introduced in Chapters 3 and 4 by sketching the novelist Leo Tolstoy's logic of

power and free will. Tolstoy was not a sociologist, but as a giant literary figure, he possessed a philosophical imagination infused with the social science perspectives emerging in his era. Tolstoy's significance for us is his ability to see through the illusion of the transparency of introspection and the myth of individualism. Our experience of ourselves and the world around us turns out to be a poor guide to matters of fact about reality, including what we believe about the reality of ourselves.

Chapter 6 hammers home the idea that I have been progressively revealing, one of the most important barriers to the sociological imagination: individualism is a myth. Humans are the current endpoint of the evolution of the cooperative principle in evolution, a principle that first revealed itself when evolution unfolded cellular and colonial cooperation as adaptive mechanisms. Colonial cooperation evolved through grouping behavior, sociation, and social networks. Chapter 7 continues to build the sociological rationale for viewing individualism as a myth by introducing the ideas of one of the founding figures of sociology, the Polish sociologist Ludwig Gumplowicz. Gumplowicz is a sociologist to be conjured with when it comes to issues of free will and agency. Gumplowicz provides a strong sociological foundation for Tolstoy's more philosophical observations.

Having brought individualism, free will, and agency into question, we are now ready in Chapter 8 to see how sociology solves the problem of the nature and origin of belief in gods that do not exist. Chapter 9 breaks down the boundaries between brain/mind/self and introduces the concept of a brain integrated with social and environmental ecologies, a social brain. In Chapter 10, we explore the standard idea of institutions in terms of our theme of walls of imprisonment. We explore how the standard institutions we encounter in our birth to death life cycle constrain us in varying ways and to varying degrees. The emphasis on the walls of imprisonment paints a gloomy picture of society and our machine-like lives. Chapter 11 looks in depth at two key walls of our institutional imprisonment, social class and sex and gender, and their roles in forming our identities. Chapter 12 explains the nature of race

and racism and the evolution of the concept of race from science to ideology. It also discusses what we mean by institutionalized racism and how this is reflected in business, politics, and policing. I also explain the contemporary controversies over DEI and Critical Race Theory.

Chapter 13 explores the question of whether there are escape tunnels, which can allow us to escape the walls of our imprisonment. We need mechanisms like this to explain social change. Finally, in Chapter 14, we encounter the ultimate wall of our imprisonment, the process of dying and death. Peter Berger argued that our lives are shaped by the imminent threat of death. On the one hand, it may appear that humans tend to carry on their everyday lives in denial about death, mourning, and grieving. On the other hand, perhaps there are signs in how we carry out our everyday lives that suggest otherwise. This chapter explores the topic through the lens of the sociological imagination and my own personal experience, as an 85-year-old faced with the imminence of death. The References section includes specialty references for the sociology of death and dying (References Part 1 (1), Marx's relevance for today (Part 1 (2)), and the bonobos (Part 1 (3)). A general set of annotated recommendations is included in References Part II, followed by a general bibliography.

Conclusion: On Perspective

This book is about a perspective, a way of seeing. It's designed to stimulate your sociological imagination. It leaves out a lot of the standard details about society and social life you'll find in standard introductory texts in the interest of the goals of perspective and imagination. I have offered many pathways to filling in the details of my more general reflections, especially in the extensive list of references. More generally, the book is a hybrid of narrative introductory sociology and sociobiography – personal reflections on what sociology has meant to me and how it has shaped my being and conduct.