

This concise, lucid supplementary text is based upon the proposition that sociology has more to offer than obvious statements disguised in difficult terminology. It is a cliché that sociology has a bad reputation on this score. Randall Collins' response is to guide students through discussions of reason, religion, power, crime, and love, demonstrating that sociology offers striking and "non-obvious" insights that deepen our understanding of society. By highlighting the unusual and unexpected conclusions that sociology warrants and by contrasting these to more obvious and superficial accounts, this brief book serves to dramatize the significance of sociological analysis for those new to its study.

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**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW YORK**

Cover design by Egon Lauterberg

ISBN 0-19-503037-0

Randall Collins

# Sociological Insight

An Introduction  
to Non-Obvious  
Sociology

- Reason
- God
- Power
- Crime
- Love

Collins, Randall. 1982. *Sociological Insight: An Introduction to Nonobvious Sociology.* New York: Oxford University Press.

# 1

## THE NONRATIONAL FOUNDATIONS OF RATIONALITY

We pride ourselves upon our rationality. To be reasonable is a good thing; to be unreasonable is a sign of an idiot, a fool, or a small child. It seems obvious that the capacity to use reason is the most central item in our make-up. The human species is referred to technically as *homo sapiens*: we are the reasonable animal. We do things not by instinct but because we have reasons for them.

It would seem to follow, then, that pretty much everything we do is based on rational thought processes—the activities of everyday life, work and business, politics and government administration. A series of practical and academic disciplines exist to show the rational principles in each realm. Science and engineering govern our rational dealings with the physical world, economics with the activities of buying and selling, political philosophy and administrative science with the realm of policy decisions and formal organization. Even on the most personal level, a version of psychology describes individual behavior as straightforwardly determined by the pursuit of rewards and the avoidance of punishments. We are rational in any direction we might turn.

Against all this commonsense belief in rationality, however, sociology stands out as a dissenter. One of the central discoveries of sociology is that rationality is limited and appears only under

certain conditions. More than that: society itself is ultimately based not upon reasoning or rational agreement but upon a non-rational foundation.

How can this be demonstrated?

The simplest reason for doubting the omnipotence of rationality is that different proponents of rationality often disagree among themselves. Different economists quite commonly present closely reasoned arguments for diametrically opposite positions. Politicians and administrators regard their own programs as highly rational, and those of their opponents as wrong. But those opponents have often had a chance to put these erroneous policies into action, very likely the last time the other party was in power. So even the proponents of rationality would have to admit that at least part of the time things were not determined by rationality but by its opposite. The question, of course, is which is which? The answer you get depends on which side you ask.

The existence of disagreements and conflicts is one reason to doubt the all-encompassing power of rationality. You may go farther and show that many policies, in themselves highly rational, can result in consequences that their own originators would regard as undesirable. A bureaucracy, for example, is designed to be a highly rational organization. Rational planning and accounting is precisely what makes an organization bureaucratic: experts plan for all possible contingencies; rules and procedures are laid down so that everything will be taken care of in the most efficient way; records are kept so that everything can be carefully accounted for. Actually, as most people know, paperwork can cause tedious delays, and the rules and regulations may be entirely inappropriate for the particular situation that comes up. Bureaucracies, designed for maximal efficiency, are notorious for their inefficiencies.

A good deal of sociology has focused on just this point. Max Weber, who formulated the theory of bureaucracy as an organization of record-keeping specialists using rational calculations, also saw that rationality can take several different, and opposing, forms. *Functional rationality* consists of following the pro-

cedures of coolly calculating how a result may be achieved most efficiently. This is in fact what we usually mean by rationality. But functional rationality is concerned only with the means to an end. *Substantive rationality*, on the other hand, considers the ends themselves.

The point was elaborated by Karl Mannheim, writing a few years after Weber's death in 1920. The same procedures can be *functionally* rational but lead to *substantively* irrational results. A bureaucracy consists of a network of specialists, who are concerned only with the most efficient means to achieve a particular goal. Just what these goals are is someone else's business, not theirs. This is why a bureaucracy can prove so frustrating for people who have to deal with it. Concerned only with their own duties, specialists consider anything that falls outside their particular province to be someone else's problem. Complaining to a bureaucracy is frustrating precisely because it is so easy for bureaucrats to evade responsibility. And this is not just a failure on the part of the individuals involved; it is the very rationality of the organization that results in the inability of bureaucrats to see the overall ends they are meeting or failing to meet.

One might suppose that it is the responsibility of the top-level administrators to see to the overall results. The problem is, the more bureaucratic the organization, the more the administrators themselves are trapped by their own machinery. They rely on the calculations and reports of specialists to tell them what is going on, and hence their view of the world is shaped by these same organizational procedures. The top executives see the world through the eyes of the accountants and engineers who report to them. As Mannheim argued, functional rationality tends to drive out substantive rationality. From this perspective, the governments of the twentieth century are prime examples of bureaucratic machinery running out of control. Within any government bureaucracy plans are carefully formulated and rationally carried out. Nevertheless, the results are often wastefulness and the creation of unforeseen problems in place of the old ones. Programs designed to reduce unemployment can produce infla-

tion; regulations designed to increase safety can cause ruinous expenses and reduce productivity.

At the extreme, functional rationality can even threaten the very existence of civilization. For example, the carefully calculated and scientifically based preparations for military defense have resulted in an arms race that could easily culminate in total destruction by nuclear war. Mannheim, writing before World War II, did not foresee atomic weapons, but his point is particularly powerful because he shows the underlying organizational forms from which the arms race emerges. It is precisely the preponderance of functional rationality over substantive rationality that makes people unable to look ahead to the larger ends. Everyone concentrates on doing their own job, calculating the most efficient means to an end, acting as a cog in a larger machine. The purpose of the cog is to turn a particular wheel; the person who acts as the cog becomes unable to form any judgment about why the wheel should turn in the first place or whether it might not be better if the whole machine were scrapped and replaced with something else. Mannheim thus saw modern governments stumbling into wars willingly or not. It all happens because their own functional rationality makes it impossible to do anything else.

The irrational consequences of rational procedures are not confined to the military and political realms. The line of analysis begun in the nineteenth century by Karl Marx, and pursued in various forms by a number of modern sociologists, sees a similar dynamic in the economic realm. For the essence of capitalism, Marx pointed out, is precisely its tendency to reduce everything to calculations of profitability. In the process, human values are subordinated to economic ones, and the consideration of human beings becomes lost in the capitalist machinery. Furthermore, even the economic outcomes of the system are irrational in the long run. Marx saw the capitalist drive for profits resulting in crises of unemployment and business failure in which eventually even the capitalist class would be destroyed.

In Mannheim's terms, the *functional* rationality of capitalism is at the root of its *substantive* irrationality.

A number of different theories in sociology, then, focus on the unintended consequences of various actions that start out as rational in themselves. One might even say that the specialty of sociology is the study of processes that do not turn out to be rational. Nevertheless, in an important respect we are still on the surface of the problem. We have been dealing with examples of rational behavior that end up having irrational consequences. But there is also a more fundamental approach that shows that rationality itself is not the basis upon which society exists in the first place.

This analysis was formulated around the turn of the century by Émile Durkheim, a slightly older contemporary of Max Weber. In an important respect, modern sociology begins with Durkheim. He created the first university position in sociology in France and provided a good deal of the fundamental concepts and methods of sociology. It is worth pointing out, however, that certain aspects of Durkheim's theories are quite controversial today. Durkheim regards society as analogous to a biological organism in which every part contributes to the harmonious integration of the whole. This line of analysis, known as functionalism, tries to interpret each social institution as contributing to social order. Several schools of thought in modern sociology, including those that draw upon the intellectual traditions of Weber and Marx, reject Durkheim's functionalist approach. These schools stress instead the role of conflict and domination among social classes and other groups as prime determinants of the forms of social life. My own preference is to lean heavily upon Weberian conflict theory while incorporating (as Weber did) a number of ideas from Marx. Nevertheless, certain ideas of Durkheim remain absolutely central for sociological theory. These are his proof that society, and rationality itself, rest upon a nonrational foundation, and his theory of rituals as the mechanism by which group solidarity is created. In fact, as I will try

to show, Weberian and Marxian conflict theories cannot really work unless they incorporate these Durkheimian ideas at their base.

In other words, I shall borrow part of Durkheim's theory but not all of it. This means separating Durkheim's microsociology from his macrosociology, using the former much more than the latter. Durkheim's macrosociology is his emphasis on the integration of the entire society as one big unit, which is precisely what Weber and Marx reject. Durkheim's microsociology is his theory of rituals in small groups. In my view, the overall structure of society is best understood as a result of conflicting groups, some of which dominate others. [But conflict and domination themselves are possible only because the groups are integrated on the microlevel.] Durkheimian theory is still the best guide to how this is done. Moreover, Durkheim's insights into rationality and rituals have been followed up by the most notable micro-sociologists of current sociology. Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology is in many ways another version of Durkheim's analysis of the nonrational foundations of rationality; Erving Goffman's studies bring Durkheim's theory of rituals to bear upon the details of everyday life.

In what follows, I shall trace Durkheim's proofs that society must rest upon a nonrational foundation, adding further evidence amassed by recent theorists. The next chapter presents Durkheim's theory of rituals. This shows not only how nonrational solidarity is created but also gives us a theory of *various kinds* of solidarity, which can explain a variety of different social forms. The theory originated in Durkheim's sociology of religion, but it extends far beyond this to topics such as politics and ideology. In the hands of Goffman, as we shall see, it develops into a theory of ritual in the secular, irreligious world of modern everyday encounters. This gives us some of the tools we need for analyzing, in later chapters, topics such as power, crime, and even the conflicts of sexual domination and liberation.

We will keep our eye on the fact that people pursue their own selfish interests at the same time that they have feelings of

solidarity with at least some other people. Rationality and calculation, too, have their place in the scheme, along with their nonrational foundations. The key place to start, though, is with the Durkheimian theory of nonrational solidarity. This is one of sociology's most important nonobvious insights, a building block upon which much else rests.

### THE PRECONTRACTUAL BASIS OF CONTRACTS

A traditional, rationalistic way of talking about society uses the concept of a social contract. "We, the people of the United States," begins the Constitution, "in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America." This refers to the founding of a government, but the idea is quite general. Political theorists like Hobbes and Rousseau saw the origins of human society in a contract made long ago by people deliberately banding together to follow common rules and reap the benefits of social cooperation. The actual event of making the original social contract in primitive times may be a metaphor, but the basic idea is intended quite realistically. People who are joined together in a society gain important things they cannot acquire alone, and hence it is a rational choice to form a society. Presumably we keep on reaffirming this rational choice as we see the benefits we get from upholding society and its rules.

Nevertheless, if we follow the logic of a strictly rational viewpoint, we come to the opposite conclusion. If people acted on a purely rational basis, they would never be able to get together to form a society at all.

This sounds paradoxical. Joined together, people can increase their economic productivity by a division of labor. Having formed a state, they can live under the protection of a rule of law and defend themselves against outside attack. It would ap-

pear, then, that the benefits of society are obvious, and that rational individuals would see these benefits and form some kind of social contract that provided for their cooperative existence. Why shouldn't this obvious argument explain the existence of society?

The trouble lies, as Durkheim pointed out, in the question of just how a contract would be negotiated. For every contract is really two contracts. One is the contract that we consciously make—to establish a society, form a government, found an organization, agree to deliver goods at a certain price. That part is easy enough. But there is a second, hidden contract: the implicit contract that you and your partners will obey the rules of the first contract.

What does this mean? It raises the point that every realistic businessperson, every shrewd politician, would be aware of: the possibility that someone will cheat. To make it worthwhile to enter into a contract, one must be sure that the other side will uphold their part of the bargain.

What is more, if we assume that people are purely rational individuals, who carefully calculate their possible gains and losses, then it becomes impossible for either side to agree to a contract. The rational individual, like a cynical politician, must consider realistically what is likely to happen: the other side may or may not live up to the rules of the agreement. Since the other side may cheat, you yourself must rationally choose whether to live up to the rules or not. And this calculation will make the shrewd bargainer wary of any agreement.

Supposing you live up to your side of the bargain but the other side cheats. What happens? You lose whatever you put into it, and your partner gets something for nothing. The same applies in the other direction. If you cheat and your partner doesn't, then you get their contribution and put out nothing yourself.

Purely rationally, therefore, you stand most to gain if you cheat. If your partner is honest, you will gain everything and lose nothing. If your partner cheats too, then at least you haven't

lost anything; neither side puts anything in, neither gets anything out, and you're back dead even where you started.

But what, you may ask, if both sides live up to the bargain? Don't they both benefit? Yes, but in that case no one gets something for nothing. There is an exchange; presumably both sides make some profit (although not always). If you compare this with the situation in which one side successfully cheats the other, you can see that you make much more profit by successfully cheating than by completing a deal in which both sides live up to their promises.

The bottom line, then, is: between cheating and keeping your promise, cheating is the more rational strategy. Cheating ensures that at worst you lose nothing and at best you gain a great deal. Keeping your promise, on the other hand, means that at best you gain a little while at worst you can lose a lot. The rational individual, thus, will always cheat.

If this were a completely rational world, no one would ever enter into a social contract and the world would consist of isolated individuals eternally suspicious of each other. Society would never get formed, though not because the presocial world is somehow savage and undeveloped, but precisely because it is *too* rational.

When Durkheim raised this argument, he did not mean to show that social organization is impossible. Obviously it is possible, since it exists. What he did mean to show was that social organization is not based ultimately on contracts. To the extent that now, in the modern world, contracts do exist—property contracts, business agreements, employment contracts, insurance policies and all the rest—it is because something exists underneath or prior to them. Somehow people have made that second, implicit contract to live up to the rules of the first, explicit contract.

Again, this is only a metaphor. What underlies our contracts is clearly not some other kind of contractual agreement. The same reasoning would apply to it as applies to the first contract. Would a rational, self-interested individual enter into a contract

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to uphold a contract? No, a rational person would have to expect that the other side would cheat on this contract, too, and would decide that the best strategy to follow would be to cheat first. So for the second, "deep" contract to hold good, there would have to be a third, still deeper contract—a contract to uphold the contract to uphold the contract. This obviously leads to an infinite regress. Once one starts questioning and calculating about just how one will come out of any agreement, there is no logical place to stop.

Durkheim concludes that contracts are based upon something nonrational. He calls this "precontractual solidarity." In effect, this means society is based on *trust*. People can work together not because they rationally decide there are benefits from doing so, but because they have a feeling they can trust others to live up to agreements. Society works precisely because people don't have to rationally decide what benefits they might get and what losses they might incur. People do not have to think about these things and that is what makes society possible.

So far, this may seem logically airtight. I have rationally shown that rationality can never establish social ties and that something beyond rationality must be invoked. Rationality points to its own limits. Fortunately, there does seem to be something beyond it. There is precontractual, nonrational solidarity, and that comes to our rescue.

Still, if we square this argument with what we know about the world, there are points that might make us uneasy. For one thing, it should be obvious that people get more from being in a successful cooperative organization than from working as isolated individuals. Society makes possible a division of labor; people working together can build houses, make roads, produce varieties of food, clothing, luxuries, and innumerable things that isolated individuals working alone could never accomplish. Why cannot the rational individual just look at this and make a rational decision to forgo cheating in order to reap the benefits of large-scale cooperation?

From the point of view of our rational model of exchange

this means that each individual should calculate not just the short-term payoffs from cheating or keeping a promise but also the long-term payoffs. If cheating seems more rational, that is because we have looked only at the short run. In the long run everyone has far more to gain by keeping their contracts operating smoothly. Even if there is only a small payoff for each transaction, over a long period of time this can build up to far more wealth and comfort than any cheater could gain from an isolated incident.

Nevertheless, I think that Durkheim's argument is on firm grounds. At any point along the line, individuals are going to be tempted to cheat. The more wealth there is in the pot—let's say it has been building up by a long history of successful cooperation—the more tempting it is going to be. And to be realistic here, as well as merely logical, we would have to say that the possibility of fraud is always with us, and the purely rational individual would always have to be on guard against it. Hence the calculating situation would come up over and over again, with the payoffs from cheating growing all the time. Rational individuals would know that these temptations would be seen by their partners as well as by themselves, and we are back in the same deadlock of mutual suspicions with which we began.

### THE FREE-RIDER PROBLEM

There is a modern form of this argument that has been discussed a good deal in recent years. In this form, the question is not so much what makes society possible but, rather, once a society exists, how does it keep individuals attached to it? How does it make them contribute to the whole? The problem is that, left to their own rational self-interest, individuals take unfair advantage of contributions that other people make to the community as a whole.

Imagine a public bus service that is to be completely free. Everyone is asked to contribute to the cost of the bus, to chip in occasionally for gasoline, and to pay the driver. But the con-

tributions are purely voluntary, and no fares are to be collected. Anyone can ride the bus whenever they want. People wouldn't have to worry about forgetting their wallets or having the correct change. The service would simply be available to everyone.

Now what would happen in this situation? Well, if people are going to be purely rational, they will calculate the costs and benefits of various courses of action. If no one contributes, of course, everyone would probably realize that there would be no bus service. So it is rational to want people to contribute to the cost of the bus. But notice, it is rational mainly to want *everyone else* to contribute, but not you yourself. The best deal is to be a free rider: get everyone else to pay for the community service while you ride free. Yet if everyone did this, the bus service would never be able to pay for itself.

The argument is not designed to show that this kind of idealistic community project is impossible, but rather that it cannot be done simply by relying on people's rationality. The fareless bus service could work if most people had a strong sense of unselfishness, or a feeling of duty, or were full of enthusiastic sentiments about the kind of free community they were making. The point is that these are transrational sentiments—emotions, moral feelings—and not rational calculations. This is true even if the proponents of such a reform might regard themselves simply as intelligent, rational people working out a plan from which everyone in the community would benefit. Certainly their plan may be rational—but only from the point of view of the group. The leap beyond rationality comes when you try to attach individuals to the group, to make them think of themselves simply as one group member among many others. Left alone, however, the rational thing for an individual to do is to encourage everyone else to act like a good citizen of the community, while he or she gets to be the free rider.

The fareless bus service may be only a hypothetical example, but there are many real-life instances of this problem. There was a famous murder, for instance, that took place in New York City while many people watched, but no one did anything about it.

The woman, named Kitty Genovese, was attacked at night while walking through a housing project. A man stabbed her with a knife, and she screamed for help. Dozens of people came to their windows in the nearby apartment houses. The attacker ran away. But then nothing happened. Kitty Genovese still lay wounded on the walkway. No one came to help; no one called the police. Eventually the murderer, who must have realized that no help was on its way, returned and stabbed her again. Presumably he did not want to be identified and decided to eliminate the key witness by finishing off the job.

The murderer seemed to be operating, at least by his final act, under cold-blooded rationality. The crowd of onlookers, safely behind their high windows, were presumably just cowards. This may be so, and it may also be true that they were displaying a very low degree of human sympathy and moral involvement by not bothering to call the police. But although these people did not act very admirably, it is not necessarily true that they were indifferent to the fate of the woman being murdered. Instead, they may all have been acting out a version of the free-rider problem.

There is some other evidence to back this up. Social psychologists have recreated the situation in a laboratory experiment. The key element in the situation was that there was a large crowd of people at the windows. They knew something was going on below, and what is more important, they knew that lots of other people knew it too. People looking out their windows could see other people at their windows. It was precisely because of this that no one went to help Kitty Genovese, and no one called the police: everyone assumed that *someone else would do it*. "After all," everyone may have reasoned, "why do it if someone else does? It only takes one phone call, and with all these people doubtless lots of others will already have done it by the time I get on the phone." The irony here is that everyone thought that way.

The spectators, then, were not necessarily totally immoral and unsympathetic but were only being rational about how to



implement their morality. If you assume someone else has called the police, then your call contributes nothing and involves you in a slight inconvenience. Or supposing you were the first to call, then you would have to be interviewed as a police witness, asked questions for a report, possibly called to testify in court. If any of these people had been the sole witness of the attack on Kitty Genovese, most of them would probably have overridden these calculations about their own possible inconvenience and gone ahead and called the police. It is because of the self-awareness of the crowd of onlookers that people felt free to calculate these costs and benefits of doing it themselves as compared to letting someone else do it, i.e., precisely because everyone was reasonably certain that someone else would "pay for the bus," they felt entitled to be a moral free rider. Ironically, it was the peculiar structure of this crowd, seeing each other behind their closed windows, that sealed Kitty Genovese's death.

There are other, less melodramatic instances of the free-rider problem. One of them we see all around us, in the form of the trash that people throw on the sidewalks, in the parks and other public places. Why do people throw trash around considering that it makes the environment look so lousy for all of us? The main reason is probably the disproportion between the individual cause and the collective effect. An individual only discards a chewing gum wrapper or a paper cup; all by itself this small amount of trash is scarcely noticeable. What disfigures the landscape is the fact that large numbers of people throw their garbage out, and that adds up to a public mess.

Now look at the individual as a rational actor. A rational person knows that if no one threw trash, the streets would be a lot cleaner. But if you stop yourself from tossing that soft-drink can out the car window and dutifully wait until you find a trash can, it isn't going to make very much difference. By yourself, you really can't make public places look noticeably better, even if you are the kind of person who not only doesn't throw trash but goes around picking up trash that other people have left. Even if you want a better-looking world around you, it isn't

really rational to refrain from throwing trash in public places. You simply can't achieve the goal as an individual, and so it is rational to give up and take the small convenience of not bothering to look for a trash can.

I am not making this argument, incidentally, in order to persuade people that it is all right to throw trash in public. Personally, I am glad that there are some people who don't and that some even go out of their way to pick up other people's trash. My point is that this meritorious behavior is not motivated by rationality but by something deeper: some kind of moral sentiment or maybe just an irrational phobia about messiness. Such phobias, as far as I am concerned, we should have more of. But we can't assume we can make the world a cleaner place just by convincing people rationally that they can do it as individuals.

What these examples demonstrate, in fact, is that a good deal of social life must be carried out in an explicitly organized, collective form or it can't be carried out at all. One way in which the free-rider problem is resolved is to not leave things up to individuals' free choice. Two ways in which the environment could be cleaned up, for example, are either to launch a moral crusade and generate a widespread emotional desire for cleanliness or to do it by action of a specific government agency. The former is not impossible, but it is hard to program or plan; we are fortunate that at various times there are tides of feeling rippling across the society that motivate people to care for their common environment. But such emotions cannot always be counted upon, and the more usual way to keep the streets and parks clean is for the government to hire people specifically to pick up the trash.

To put it another way, the free-rider problem can be overcome by not leaving things free. I don't know if the free bus service has been tried, but there was an analogous instance in Britain when socialized medicine was first introduced. All medical services were paid for by the state, and anyone could see a doctor anytime without charge. The initial result was an enormous increase in the frequency with which people went to the

doctor. A great many complaints followed. Doctors felt swamped and declared that many people were coming in with dubious or no clear symptoms. This made services crowded for everyone, and dissatisfaction was widespread among the public users of the medical services. In other words, people were taking stock of the situation as individuals and decided they would get the maximum personal use of the free medical services, even if they didn't really need them and even if it resulted in a traffic jam at the doctors' offices that inconvenienced everyone.

Then the administrators of the medical system hit upon a solution. They instituted a small fee for each office visit, the equivalent of a dollar. The numbers of patients who appeared dropped off considerably, and doctors felt that once again they were seeing the normal range of medical complaints. Why did this happen? Basically what changed was that it was no longer a free-rider situation. Individuals now felt that they were back in a more normal situation, paying for medical services, and they began to calculate accordingly as to whether they really felt sick enough to incur the expense of seeing a doctor.

Oddly enough, this example points to the symbolic nature of these "rational" decisions. Whether something is "free" or not turns out to be more than a matter of real costs. From a strictly practical viewpoint, the fee charged was quite minimal, and virtually anyone who was genuinely ill would still find the service a bargain at this price. It appears, rather, that the idea of being a free rider is by and large irresistible for most people, if the collective provides something without attaching any responsibility for using it in a way that safeguards the rights of other people to use it too. (The same sort of thing has been noticed in wars: it has often happened that soldiers will go without fresh rations for days because of supply difficulties; then when supplies finally get through, they waste a good deal of their now-abundant food instead of saving it for other troop units that might be in the same condition they were in yesterday.) As long as the state was providing medical services absolutely free, no one felt any compunction about squandering them. But as soon

as they had to pay even a nominal fee, they no longer seemed to have this attitude of "getting something for nothing, and everyone else be damned."

It is even possible to suggest that this tells us something about the symbolic nature of money. A few coins, after all, mean very little as far as economic exchange goes. But this token amount can nevertheless make the difference between "free" and "paid for," which can trigger an entirely different way of approaching social relationships. In fact, money may be symbolic in this way a good deal more than we realize. The value of being frugal does not often add up to very much objectively, e.g., you usually save very little by checking all the differences in pennies between the canned goods at the supermarket, especially if you blow far more than the difference at a restaurant or the movies. Ironically, people find it easier to be frugal about small matters than about large ones, such as buying a house or a new car, which can negate everything that one can save at the supermarket in years. But socially, this kind of small-scale frugality does make sense. Because you buy small goods so much more often than large ones, you have far more chances to exercise your sense of control over market prices in that way than in a one-shot deal involving some much more expensive item.

As in so many things, it is our subjective feelings about the world that count, more than the objective value of practical payoffs that we receive. Even when we do calculate, it may be only a symbolic calculation, expressing an uncalculated feeling that it is good to calculate. Ultimately, what holds society together is not the calculations but just these sorts of deeper sentiments.

#### *THE RISE OF CONTRACTUAL SOCIETY*

A follower of Durkheim could also appeal to the historical facts. If we stick, say, to economic contracts, the fact is that successful business contracts are a relatively recent innovation. Business dealings in traditional societies were carried out either in a highly ceremonial and distinctly noneconomic fashion or

else with a very high level of suspicion. On the one hand, there were traditional systems of trade between particular families, or ceremonial objects, which circulated among different tribes in a prescribed manner. Here there was plenty of trust but little real economic calculation. A certain household had to deliver a basket of yams to their in-laws on a certain festival day and received back a basket of fish upon the birth of a child. It was this sort of tradition that made up much of tribal economics and not really buying and selling; there was no encouragement at all to increase productivity or devise new products.

On the other hand, in societies like medieval Europe or China, there were real economic transactions. Long-distance traders would arrive with goods that were produced not for subsistence but in order to make a profit. This constituted a real market; but since the partners to transactions were strangers to one another, they carried out their dealings with a high degree of suspicion on both sides. Everyone wanted to have goods in hand before they delivered the cash, and no one in their right mind would have extended any kind of credit without taking extreme precautions. It is for this reason that ancient and medieval societies around the world could not produce a modern-style capitalist industrial society.

Generally speaking, these societies were not held back by lack of the material resources for economic productivity. One cannot say, either, that the medieval Chinese or Italians or the ancient Greeks were not rational enough to see that they stood more to gain by being less suspicious and more willing to make long-term contracts. On the contrary, from our viewpoint these merchants were excessively rational. They were concerned about the long-term profits and losses as well as the short-run balance. If somehow a modern American suddenly appeared before them and repeated the argument of the paragraphs above, they would undoubtedly reply that if they weren't suspicious they would lose even more money in the long run. And they would have been right.

The clincher is that when a modern contractual economy did

come into being, it happened precisely in the way that Durkheim's argument would predict. It took the creation of new bonds of trust to make it possible. The rise of capitalism was certainly a shift away from the ultrasuspicious dealing of the Middle Ages. Businesspeople began to emphasize a slow, steady accumulation of small profits, repeated over and over again across many transactions, and that meant living up to the terms of their contracts. Long-term contracts began to replace the shady bargaining and one-shot deals of the medieval merchants. It was this that made mass production practical. What good is it to have machinery turning out large numbers of items if there is no way of selling them? It is not industrial technology that made possible the modern economy, then, but this shift in the way in which business was carried out that made possible the technological developments of the industrial revolution.

What is crucial for my argument is the fact that this shift to a highly contractual society went along with a change in the realm of "precontractual solidarity." The capitalist takeoff and the industrial revolution were accompanied by a religious revolution. This leads us to a famous argument of Max Weber concerning the way in which the Protestant ethic affected the spirit of capitalism. This is actually a more complex theory than it is usually taken to be, but the only point that need detain us is that the Protestant type of religious morality motivated businesspeople to be honest, to stop cheating their customers, perhaps even to cease being concerned with purely worldly profits. The religious revolution, in short, created pockets of trust within a society that had long been used to an atmosphere of economic distrust. It was in these pockets that a new, contractual economy could build up and eventually spread to take over the world.

#### POWER AND SOLIDARITY

Opposition to the Durkheimian argument ought to be fading at this point, but there is at least one more possible rejoinder. Yes, you may agree, it is true that contracts cannot be upheld

purely by the self-interest of the individuals involved. But why fall back on some mysterious solidarity or feelings of trust? All that is really needed is something to enforce contracts in the event that they are broken. If someone cheats, you can always take him or her to court; if something is stolen, you can have the thief arrested. You can rationally have faith in contracts because you know that they can be enforced. So it is not some irrational emotion that makes contracts possible but the existence of the courts and the police.

Now this isn't a bad answer. The pure Durkheimian argument seems to hang in the air in a kind of perfect abstractness. If you bring it down to earth, of course, you have to admit that there are courts and police in the world. Anyone who has ever been involved in business, or in the legal professions, knows that people still cheat today, in our highly contractual society, and regularly get hauled into court because of it.

Moreover, this argument has the merit of filling in many important details of the way in which capitalist society emerged historically. Weber, after all, was not just concerned with the Protestant ethic; he also paid a great deal of attention to the way in which the legal system developed along with the structure of the modern state, the police, the army, and all the other agencies by which social order can be enforced. Only when courts and governments could be organized to enforce business contracts could capitalism take off. The foundation of modern capitalism is not just religion but the state. Precontractual solidarity, it would seem, is not really a matter of trust but a matter of force. People live up to contracts because they have to, whether they want to or not.

This is a hard-nosed and realistic argument, and it makes us pay attention to some crucial parts of social history that we might otherwise tend to ignore. Nevertheless, although it pushes it one step further back, it leaves the Durkheimian argument intact. Suppose we admit that the state upholds the law of contracts. What upholds the state? The state after all is a social organization; it coordinates people who have agreed to work to-

gether to accomplish some political end. Why should the people who make up the state adhere to the contract among themselves? This puts us back where we started. Why should the officials of the state obey orders considering that it would be more rewarding to cheat on this too and follow their own interest? And, of course, assuming the other officials are rational individuals too, you would expect that they also will cheat and try to take advantage of you. On purely rational grounds there is no reason why the state should hold together, any more than anything else. So the state cannot back up social contracts unless the state itself rests on some kind of precontractual solidarity.

There is one last line of defense against this argument. You could say that the members of the state—the officials, the police, the soldiers in the army—obey orders because if they don't the force of the state will punish them. Now this is true, but only because the state already exists today. But how was it possible to create such an organization? The coercive arm of the state can certainly exert tremendous force against the individual, but it is strong only as long as the state exists, i.e., only as long as the contract to obey orders holds among the people who make up the state. Here again historical and contemporary reality shows just how little one can take this for granted. States and armies break apart when people in them stop thinking of themselves as members of the group and think only of their own individual self-interest. It is when the army thinks "every man for himself!" that they are about to panic into full retreat. When everyone in a state thinks that way, the state is on the verge of revolution.

For this reason, we are forced to admit that the state is held together in the same way as any other social organization: by some kind of precontractual or nonrational solidarity. Weber described the basis of the state as its *legitimacy*. This is not a rational calculation of self-interest but a belief that the state is valid and powerful. Legitimacy may exist only in people's minds, but if it does exist there, then it makes the state powerful. When the state is powerful, it can force people to obey and this

in turn makes it even more legitimate. The whole process turns on itself full circle. An irrational belief in the state, whatever its foundation, creates its own reality. Although rational individuals could never get together and create a state purely by making a contract, people who share a common sentiment provide the basis for a state whose powers can coerce everyone.

This does not mean that everyone has to feel solidarity with each other in order for a state to exist. The government might well be a military dictatorship or perhaps the temporary rule of a particular political party. The basic nature of politics is disagreement and struggle among various factions. But the key point is that *no particular faction would be able to dominate others if it lacked solidarity in its own ranks.* For a group to have this solidarity, its members must stop calculating their own self-interest vis-à-vis each other and feel only their common interests as a group. This requires that somehow they share a nonrational sentiment that makes them want to contribute to the group instead of being free riders. It is for this reason that ideologies, symbols, and emotions are so important in politics.

It would be a mistake to conclude that all of society is one big mass of perfect solidarity. On the other hand, it would be an even bigger mistake to assume that nothing exists but calculating, self-interested individuals. As we have seen, if everyone were solely calculating all the time, social groups would not exist at all; there would be very little for self-interested individuals to fight and connive about. There would be no state for dictators to rule, no wealth for embezzlers to steal, no trust to abuse.

What we need to recognize is simply that nonrational sentiments are crucial in any organization; *but the extent and strength of these sentiments are variable.* Just because individuals feel solidarity toward some people in some groups does not mean they feel it toward everyone. Sentiments of trust among members of a family will suffice to hold a family together (and those sentiments do not have to occur all the time—part of the time will do, leaving plenty of room for quarrels within the

group). If the world were made up of only families like this, they would live in little pockets of internal solidarity, with considerable distrust among them externally. In fact, numerous historical societies have taken that form. In another form there may be solidarity only within the military regime that constitutes a state, ruling over a subjugated populace that has no trust whatever in its masters. That is another type of society, and history has seen all too much of it as well.

I could go on and on with the variations. The capitalist economy, with a rather widespread form of trust in certain kinds of economic contracts, is yet another version. Here, people have enough trust so that they will put their money in someone else's hands to invest it; they will work expecting that they will be paid for it at the end of the month; they will accept pieces of paper promising to pay out a sum of money from a checking account. These and myriad other little acts of trust make possible a gigantic economic machine. It is obvious, too, that this society is full of conflicts and has its own occasion for distrust. But in an ironic way, the distrustful occasions basically depend upon the trustful ones. It is because people put their money in banks that there can be bank robbers; it is because most people are willing to accept on faith the value of a piece of paper that money can become the object of the complicated deals of financial speculators.

Sociologists do not give up on explaining any of this. They aim to show just exactly when and how class conflict works, why crime occurs, and all the rest. They are interested in both solidarity and conflict; and in fact, it is impossible to explain one without the other. They are also concerned with why some societies are enclaves of little feuding families while others have large economic networks or dictatorial states. The calculating, self-interested individual has a place in all this. But such individuals are never very effective unless they can relate to non-rational feelings of solidarity that hold groups together.

An individual can dominate other people mainly by taking advantage of their feelings of solidarity. Whoever can convince

others that he or she is really one of them has a better chance of taking advantage of them. The most successful exploiter is the one who makes others feel that he or she has their best interests at heart. This means making an appeal precisely on that level and through those mechanisms by which nonrational sentiments of solidarity operate. This is a fundamental weapon of dictators, con-artists, politicians, and perhaps everyone who wishes to pursue their own self-interest aggressively in society. Feelings of solidarity are often called out in people, deep beneath their own rational calculation of self-interest. Whoever knows how to arouse these feelings in others has a crucial weapon, to use for good or evil.

If self-interest individuals need to be concerned with solidarity, this is even more true for self-interested groups. Groups that are in conflict with other groups can only come to exist in the first place if they are held together internally. Solidarity and conflict are not mutually exclusive; solidarity is a crucial weapon for whoever wants to gain some advantage over someone else. The best-organized group usually wins, and that means the group with the most internal solidarity.

The Marxian theory of class conflict has recognized this too, in a way. For Marxists, a key question has been how people, especially the working class, can be organized to fight effectively for power. Usually this has been described as the problem of creating "class consciousness," i.e., having individual workers become aware of their interest as a group. The problem, however, is by no means a simple one. People's feelings of solidarity do not automatically line up into two sharply divided groups of capitalists and workers. A good deal of the time people may act as purely self-interested individuals, e.g., different businesses are by no means allies when they are competing against each other for the same market, and workers are not unified if they are competing for a particular job or a promotion.

Nevertheless, under particular conditions these disputes among individuals are put aside and groups do form. But how many groups will there be? The magic number two does not

come up so very often. Frequently there are many different business interests—bankers versus industrialists versus retailers versus exporters versus farmers—and it is the complex jockeying for favors that makes up so much of ordinary politics. Similarly, workers may form into trade unions, but the different unions may well be at odds with each other. The teamsters may be in conflict with the auto workers; union members may monopolize jobs, making them inaccessible to nonunion workers. Female workers may be discriminated against by male workers, and the same may happen among white, black, and ethnic groups.

The problem for the Marxist theorist is not that there is too little class conflict in the world but that there is too much. The great unresolved issue is to show the conditions under which the smaller conflicting groups amalgamate into larger ones, so that the conflict is eventually simplified into the classic two-sided battle line that Marx predicted. It may turn out to be the case, though, that this never happens and that even the great revolutions of the past occurred in situations of conflict among three or even more groups. This model of revolution was recently proposed by the neo-Marxist theorist Theda Skocpol.

For sociologists in general, I propose that two-sided conflicts between classes are only a part of our concerns. What we aim to show is why the whole range of different group line-ups exist at various times. When do large numbers of competing groups exist—be they economic and occupational groups, racial and ethnic groups, families, political parties, or social movements? When do these boil down into lineups of only a few groups? Does total solidarity of all groups ever occur so that there is only one group, and if so, under what conditions? And at the opposite extreme, when do isolated individuals detach themselves entirely from any group bonds and pursue only their own self-interest?

These problems are by no means all solved by sociological theory. But some of the crucial mechanisms by which these events take place, I believe, are understood. The central lesson, as argued in this chapter, is that group organization does not

depend on rational calculations. It is not, as Marx thought, that groups are formed when people become *conscious* of their common interests. The consciousness and the interests are only the surface of things. What is beneath the surface is a strong emotion, a *feeling* of a group of people that they are alike and belong together.

This is not to say that the interests aren't real. But the reason I say they are on the surface of things is that people have all sorts of interests, some of which bring them together with others, some of which divide them. A doctor in a medical association, for example, "obviously" has an interest in joining with other doctors to monopolize the income from practicing medicine; at the same time, it is equally in that particular doctor's interest to compete with other doctors for patients. The same kind of thing can be said for workers in a trade union or members of any other group. And this dilemma operates as groups must choose whether to compete with other groups or to join them; it is equally in the interest of a trade union to compete with other unions for preferred treatment as it is to join together to fight for the interests of all workers. Rational interests simultaneously attract and divide people. And the free-rider problem is always with us, tempting individuals to make their own best deal at the expense of other members of their group.

Which interests win out, nonetheless, is not a matter of rational calculation. It depends on something deeper: on moral feelings that bind people together in a group. The procedures that produce these moral feelings, I am going to argue, are *social rituals*. When such rituals have done their work and group solidarity is created, the interests that people hold in common in that group take on a new status. The interests become moral *rights* and become surrounded with a kind of symbolic halo of righteousness. From another perspective this might be called ideology. The key point is that groups not only contend over competing interests, but they also always see their own interests in *moral* terms. As we shall see, if they did not they could not even exist as groups.

Whether we are looking for the basis of class conflicts or of the solidarity that underlies a contractual society, then, we come down to the question of why some people feel that they can trust others. Durkheim showed that these feelings of trust cannot depend on rational calculations, but must have a deeper, unconscious source. And having raised the problem, Durkheim proceeded to offer a solution, his theory of social rituals. This will be the topic of the next chapter.