

**Aarons, H. & Willis, E. (2022). *The Sociological Quest: An Introduction to the Study of Social Life*. (6th Ed.)
Routledge, 188 pages, ISBN: 9781932327099.**

Reviewed by Edgar A. Burns*

The sociological quest has long been used as a concise introduction for students wanting a discipline overview in undergraduate sociology classes, as background to weekly lectures on specific topics and issues. This 6th edition brings some changes in content while continuing to overview the discipline of sociology in a brief compass. The baton passes to Evan Willis' colleague Haydn Aarons as lead author. Repeated editions of this text—it is more than 30 years since the first edition in 1991—have served to deepen understanding of sociology for undergraduates wanting to take sociology further in their BA. It also serves as a convenient heads up for students in other fields in which sociology is often set as a compulsory foundation subject, in fields such as social work, planning, social policy, or health communication.

Through successive editions, an important though less obvious use of *The sociological quest* has been its use by postgraduates teaching first-year students, in making the effort to synthesise their own understanding of sociology and communicate that in tutorials. Most of us have had the experience of needing to anchor what sociology opens up for us personally within what sociology more broadly is and does. For my own teaching as a doctoral student, I regularly used my copy of this book to brush up on main theoretical perspectives, examples, or medical issues drawn from Willis' involvement in health sociology. This helped re-learn and gain proficiency in broad sociological principles and ways of thinking, including the summary of Mill's (1959) oft-quoted "sociological imagination".

Maintaining relevance over time is a challenge for any multi-edition text. There is a two-fold interest for both new and experienced teachers communicating the possibilities and excitement of sociology—how will examples in this new edition of *The sociological quest* speak to new generations of students? First, the addition of the new content about contemporary issues of importance such as climate change, digital and social media technologies and reference to Covid-19 is important and relevant. Climate and environment examples could be foregrounded more strongly. Students today 'get' the serious urgency of environmental damage and the rapidity of global heating and its consequences that will affect their lives. I think we sociologists need to more fully develop our examples and critique of governments and corporations and of our roles as consumers causing this impending calamity. The balance of that in an introductory text can be debated, but for a new generation this is not an off-putting seriousness; students are ready, even hungry, for this. Second, academics who began careers when textbooks were the main information source remember book lists and textbook pop-up shops on campus. This has significantly reduced today, with books fading as journals and other sources have come to predominate. Yet, like the digital availability of journals, textbooks are once again becoming conveniently available as ebooks and downloadable chapters, a further twist of the story.

* **Edgar A. Burns** is Chair of Integrated Catchment Management in the School of Social Sciences, Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato | University of Waikato.

Email: edgar.burns@waikato.ac.nz

I have always found Willis' five-question set (consistent across editions) as a method of inquiry a gem for class discussions, opening up any topic, effectively neutralising fixed views or simplistic thinking. I might even have referenced "How could it be otherwise?" to raise a counterfactual point in writing my PhD thesis. Simple yet fundamental:

- What's happening?
- Why?
- What are the consequences?
- How do you know?
- How could it be otherwise?

This compact focus demonstrates the decades of undergraduate teaching of the two authors, enhanced by the examples they use throughout showing how pursuing these straightforward questions illuminates any topic from a sociological perspective. For some students these ideas are exciting and enable them to think in new ways. A strength of *The sociological quest* is that it offers non-combative ways of challenging/disrupting and broadening students' understanding through its framing and use of examples. The authors pursue their mission of bridging between sociological newcomers and the rich hinterland of sociology by providing heuristic sets like these five questions and other pairs or triplets of ideas that point to complexities without inundating the discussion with abstract language or too many references. For instance, the difference between a social problem and a sociological problem (p. 10) is a helpful concept pair for extending students' understanding. So, too, is the pairing of continuity and change (p. 22). Sociology can operate at multiple levels from micro, meso, and macro (p. 16). C. W. Mills' (1959) phrase "the sociological imagination" is elaborated to organise chapters into structural, historical, cultural, and critical perspectives. The authors reprise Mill's distinction between personal troubles and public issues (p. 17).

Climate change makes its first appearance in Chapter 3 (p. 34) and follows the authors' agenda of not overwhelming their overview with the absolute urgency of this or any one issue. However, since this chapter considers where sociology sits in the academic world, the discipline's lack of theorising environment and climate could have greater emphasis. Different approaches of scientific and humanistic forms of sociology are sketched (p. 35), including ideas like the social construction of human society, which are introduced, again, using examples from a variety of countries (p. 37). Sociological explanation is distinguished from metaphysical or faith accounts of why things happen or how things should be in society (p. 39). The authors differentiate sociology from journalism by its more academic consideration of issues and specialised language (p. 40). Everyday language can be loaded with assumptions and biases that sociology aims to avoid in describing how the social world is constructed (p. 43).

The book makes several disciplinary contrasts that are helpful to undergraduate readers who are mapping their studies and alternative perspectives in political science, anthropology, history or social work (p. 46ff). Durkheim's (2007[1897]) *Suicide* is used as a telling example of how sociology analyses something that is commonly assumed to be inherently individual. Distinguishing sociology from psychology is useful for undergraduates who are often taking both subjects (p. 44ff), noting, for instance, contrasting uses of the idea of socialisation in the two disciplines. In my own teaching, I have often used this example, feeling the sharp attention in the classroom by first-year students to what I am saying.

At the heart of the book is the application and expansion of the previously introduced idea of the sociological imagination. Chapter 4 details historical and cultural sensibilities and demonstrates how these interact with reference to a new timely example: water recycling in a globally warming and drying planet (p. 79). Sociology instructors will find the logic of combining the sensibilities—here history and culture—to

unpack Mills' sociological imagination, helpful in responding to questions or assertions in classes, bringing a consistent sociological framing to discussions that can otherwise go sideways.

Chapter 5 sketches the second two takes on Mills' sociological imagination—identifying structural aspects of any situation or phenomenon being investigated, and then bringing a critical assessment to that topic. These bread-and-butter elements of doing sociology are clearly set out for a newcomer. The relationship between structure and personal agency is outlined (p. 87). This is a great gain for students who have grown up within ideologies of personal individualism in modern western societies. Understanding structural causes can move students beyond blaming explanations. The second idea introduced, critical sociology, makes clear that the work of sociology is about analysis of ideas, not personal criticism (p. 99). Why should we believe official accounts and the claims of those with vested interests? The authors draw from their quintet of questions: “How do you know?” and “What’s your evidence?” to test claims individuals or institutions make to bring the structural and critical themes together.

Chapter 6 applies the four sensibilities of the sociological imagination—historical, cultural, structural and critical—to links between the social and biological worlds. I might have used ‘natural’ rather than ‘biological’ in the chapter title to include greater emphasis on the environment and climate change. The authors elucidate contemporary issues of genomics (and implicitly epigenetics) to raise important questions about the social shaping of what was once thought to be people’s biology: the transition from childhood to adulthood, basic distinctions sociologists make between gender and sex, and major consequences for people according to prevailing, and changing, definitions. The discussion touches on Furze’s (2008, p. 120) axiom: “environmental problems are at their base social problems”, but without going further. Biological determinism produces ideologies about what are the real causes of things that sociology challenges across all areas of life: race, gender, disability, sexuality and socio-economic status. Greater emphasis about nature and impending environmental climate heating would have given a more contemporary feel to the text.

Chapter 7 invites readers to see theories as keys for doing sociology: “introducing the idea of sociological theories or perspectives, each with their own way of conceptualising relationships” (p. 125) in social analysis. Having personally taught social methods classes with Evan Willis, the links between social theory and methods come naturally out of this discussion of how sociology is actually done. Chapter 7 considers “what is theory?” And what is its relationship to ‘facts’? “What are facts?” And anyway, “how do you ‘know’?” Technical language like ‘epistemology’ is introduced with a light touch. Sociology has no single theoretical framework, but three orienting perspectives in sociology—functionalism, conflict theories and interactionism—are outlined for students.

The discussion of research methods in Chapter 8 describes gathering and interpreting data in sociological ways. For many students the idea of empirical evidence is new since we all ‘know’ about people in an everyday sense. Generating evidence to confirm or reject what is said to be the case is a critical function of sociology that challenges commonsense ideas of facts and truth. This material is set out in a way that is suitable for students to get a sense of sociological inquiry.

In the final Chapter 9, Aarons and Willis “make a case for Sociology as an academic discipline with a set of skills that has a range of excellent applications for future career” (p. 160). Students considering going further in sociology but concerned about careers after university will find this helpful. The chapter lists quantitative skills (p. 169) and qualitative skills (p. 170) that student can apply in many fields.

The sociological quest steers between opening doors of intrigue and a brisk walk through major elements of the discipline of sociology. Instructors using the textbook will doubtless add their own expertise and preferences. For example, I have found first-year students are fascinated by learning the differences between criminal and deviant behaviour they had not thought about before. The text usefully rides the line between simple but not too simple. I appreciated updated references to climate change though I suggest the next edition will give even more prominence to the significance of new digital technologies, and

environment and climate change (Carolan, 2022; Urry, 2015) in line with Furze's (2008) quote above, as global environmental damage and climate change impact society more and more severely.

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