

SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL CHANGE:

Visions of a Better Future

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## Creating a More Just and Sustainable World

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*Now that you've come to the end of this course, possibly your first sociology class, it's time to reflect on what you've learned and how it can apply to your everyday life. You may have thought about some of the problems and issues in the world over the course of this semester, and we hope that you have done so from a different perspective than you are used to, a sociological perspective. In this chapter Jones, Haenfler, and Johnson offer some practical yet small suggestions for how you might use the concepts and the knowledge you've acquired this semester to shift your view on the world and how you might take any inspiration you have developed and harness it. Feel free to pick and choose from the tons of creative ideas they toss out and find the ones that might feel right to you. A lot of people want to make the world a better place to live in but they don't know how. After reading this chapter you will be an expert to your friends!*

Sociology allows us to see the world in a powerful new way, exposing the inner-workings of our societies and helping us to uncover social patterns that most people take for granted. It teaches us to “zoom out” of our own limited personal experiences, revealing the complexity of the social world that shapes our lives. Unfortunately, we don't always like what we see. You may have learned about racial inequality, wealth and health care disparities, sexism, global poverty, wars, urban violence, and other social problems. On top of that, you are likely worn down from a semester of hard work and inadequate sleep. Though you may be ready to take your final exam and pack it in, we

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hope you will spend some time looking past the end of the term to consider the place of sociology in your future. Beyond revealing the world's problems, thinking sociologically—using your sociological imagination—creates possibilities for change and opportunities to make a real difference in the world. In this chapter, our goals include outlining a vision for a more just and sustainable world, demonstrating the lessons sociology teaches to help us create that world, and suggesting ways you can make a difference, both as individuals and as part of social movements. By the time you are done reading, we hope that you will be able to put sociology into action.

## LESSONS OF SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL CHANGE

### Lesson: There Is Massive Inequality in Our Present World

It doesn't take a sociologist to tell you about the staggering amount of inequality and suffering in the world, and the prospects of change in the near term seem slim at best. Consider just a few examples:

- One *billion* people live on one dollar per day or less (Chen and Ravallion 2004).
- The richest 10% of humans make as much income as the bottom 90% combined (UNDP 2005, p. 4).
- Everyday in the world, 24,000 people die from preventable, hunger-related causes (UNDP 1999).
- Since World War II, 20 million people have been killed in 150 wars (Zinn 1997).
- The U.S. median household wealth for blacks is \$6,000—for whites, \$88,000 (14 times as much) (Associated Press 2004).
- In the U.S., one-and-a-half million women are raped or sexually assaulted by their intimate partner every year (Tjaden and Thoennes 2000).
- 18% of all babies in Angola die before their first birthday—67 times the rate in Sweden (CIA 2008).
- Average life expectancy in rich countries is almost 80 years but is only 50 in sub-Saharan Africa (and only 41 in Zambia!) (UNDP 2008, pp. 229–232).

This kind of information overwhelms most students, often leading to a culture of “doom and gloom” that hovers over sociology courses (Best 2001). Sociology teachers are often wary (rightly so) of telling students what they “should do” with their newly gained sociological knowledge so that courses end up bursting with information on problems, seemingly with no solutions. To many, these horrendous conditions are so foreign to their daily experience that they simply are hard to believe. These statistics represent real people—as real as you and me—living, breathing, human beings with dreams of a better life. Sociology enables us to confront uncomfortable realities of which we may rather have remained unaware. Unfortunately, too often in the sociology classroom, increasing

awareness of human suffering perpetuates a cycle of cynicism in which you 1) learn about a particularly awful situation, 2) want to help but can't see how, 3) fail to act and become disheartened or frustrated, and finally 4) try to shut out the world's problems because they only serve to aggravate and depress you. Of course, ironically, such cynical thinking just perpetuates the problems even further! It is important that we change this cycle of cynicism into a cycle of active engagement that allows us to begin resolving these social problems.

### **Lesson: Social Problems Have Structural Foundations**

By asking critical questions and conducting rigorous research, sociology equips us to understand the structural foundations or root causes of social problems, an important step to effective social change. Inequalities are perpetuated on a daily basis through our societal institutions: our governments, media organizations, religious institutions, economies, and families. These institutions tend to reflect the interests of those with more influence or power—those with higher levels of status, education, and income—resulting in many of the inequalities we've discussed. Social problems are embedded in institutions, not individuals. For example, violence toward women is not an anomaly confined to a few abusive men—it happens everyday. It is situated within patriarchal systems that devalue women and things feminine. Men's attempts to live up to a cultural ideal of being a "real man" drive much of this violence. This "tough guise," fostered in the media, glorifies certain qualities associated with manhood, such as power and control, while disdaining others, like vulnerability and compassion (Katz 2000). We must alter the cultural institutions that devalue women and glorify hypermasculinity.

### **Lesson: Social Change Requires a New Vision**

It's easy to point out the world's problems, but more difficult to envision and create something better. Given the diversity and complexity of human societies, creating a one-size-fits-all prescription seems like a daunting task. Nevertheless, we need a vision for the future, something to spark our imaginations and creativity, something to inspire us. While sociology does not provide an "objective" formula for how a society should be structured, much less how one should live, it does offer some tools and insights useful for envisioning a better world.

One important sociological insight is each of us has been socialized by our families/media/religion to believe in a set of values. By learning about other cultures, we quickly realize that if we would have grown up in a different corner of the world, our values and beliefs would be very different than the ones we have now. That profound realization brings with it a destabilizing sense of doubt. Harvard education professor William Perry (1981) calls this process moving from *dualism*, where we think our values are right and others' are wrong, to *relativism*, where all values are considered of equal merit. Relativism is great for building tolerance and understanding across groups but it does not provide much guidance for a life philosophy. So what are we supposed to believe? Perry identifies the final stage (and most challenging) of critical thinking as

*commitment*—something that involves balancing consistent openness to new ideas, reflective analytical thinking, and a deep and active commitment to core values. It involves putting ideas into action, taking risks, making mistakes, and learning from them. It also involves valuing the humanity in others as well as ourselves.

We encourage you to spend time contemplating your values. Based on our reflection, we envision a world built on the following seven foundations (Jones, Haenfler, and Johnson 2007):

*Economic Fairness:* A world dedicated to economic fairness would strive to meet every person's basic needs so that no one would lack food, shelter, clothing, or meaningful work. People's strength of character and passion should determine their opportunities rather than the economic circumstances into which they were born. The gains from economic growth should be widely shared.

*Comprehensive Peace:* A world committed to comprehensive peace would shift its creative energies toward cooperating rather than competing, resolving conflict rather than escalating it, seeking justice rather than enacting revenge, and creating peace rather than preparing for war.

*Ecological Sustainability:* A world committed to ecological sustainability would create a new vision of progress that recognizes that the future of humanity depends upon our ability to live in harmony and balance with our natural world.

*Deep Democracy:* A world built on deep democracy would empower citizens to participate in shaping their futures every day (not just on election day), provide broad access to quality information, and democratize our most powerful institutions.

*Social Justice:* A world dedicated to social justice is a place where everyone receives respect and equal access to jobs, education, and health care regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, physical or mental abilities, or economic background.

*Simple Living:* A society that embraces simple living would encourage each person to find meaning and fulfillment by pursuing their true passions, fostering loving relationships, and living authentic, reflective lives rather than by seeking status and material possessions.

*Revitalized Community:* A revitalized community would create a healthy and caring environment for people to celebrate their many shared values while embracing individual differences, and would provide support for each person's physical, emotional, and spiritual needs.

### **Lesson: We Are All Connected**

One of the broad, fundamental questions that sociologists tackle is "What is the relationship between the individual and society?" Put another way, how does society, or social context, influence individuals and how might individuals, in turn, influence society? Sociology reveals that forces outside of us shape our

beliefs, values, and opportunities. You were not born knowing girls should play with dolls and boys should play with “action figures”—you learned, from your parents, peers, teachers, and the media a host of gender “rules.” Not everyone has an equal chance to be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company—someone born to a poor rural family in Appalachia faces greater challenges than someone born to a wealthy family that can provide an elite education and powerful business connections. Recognizing we are not completely free can be a blow to the ego. On the other hand, the sociological imagination provides us an opportunity to increase our freedom and expand our options, even if we can never be totally free of society’s influence. The first step is realizing our basic interconnectedness—what you do affects me, what I do affects you, even if we can’t always see how.

American culture’s focus on individualism challenges our ability to acknowledge our interconnectedness, especially the opportunities and constraints society poses for our lives, preferring to believe we shape our own destinies. We tend to think our achievements result solely from our own hard work. In reality, we all rely on each other for our daily existence. Ecology teaches us that we eat food that grows in soil nurtured by microscopic organisms and we drink water that has vaporized from the oceans. Sociology teaches us that we wear clothing made by people we will never meet who live across the planet. Tax dollars have paid salaries of those who have educated us. Our personal well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of our families, our friends, our communities, and our planet.

### **Lesson: Your Actions Make a Difference**

As you begin to understand the interconnected nature of the world, the relationship between individuals and social structures, you realize that you are both very powerful and yet very small—you influence everything around you, yet you exist as part of something much greater than you. You may be thinking, “I don’t influence society—CEOs, famous people, legislators, and activists influence society, not people like me.” Social systems are made up of patterns of action taken by millions of people. When you study the connections that bind us all together, you gain awareness of how each of your actions affects other people and the planet. Your political activity (or inactivity) perpetuates our political system. How you spend (and invest) your money props up our economic system. Your lifestyles encourage a set of values and behaviors and discourage others. Your participation can even transform a small group of people into the beginnings of a social movement. The key question is not *if* but *how* you are impacting society. Even by doing “nothing” you perpetuate the society in its current state. Recognizing that each of your actions sends little ripples throughout the rest of society creates a sense of personal responsibility for your role in creating a better world.

### **Lesson: It’s Not Easy to Deviate from the Mainstream**

Given the power of social structures to shape who we are and what we believe, it’s not always easy to stray from the norm. As you leave this course, there are at

least two paths for you to choose from. The first path, the “conventional path,” involves living as if your sociology course never happened, shielding yourself from human suffering, staying away from people who are “different” from you, pulling back from the world and devoting yourself entirely to your own well-being and that of your immediate circle of friends and family. Programmed like a robot, you may find yourself working long hours and rewarding yourself with lots of stuff. Like the momentum of a river, our society will “naturally” carry you to this path. You don’t have to choose this path, it will choose you.

In order to live the second path, the socially engaged path, you must intentionally choose it. This path is less well charted, though many before you have taken it. It involves actively engaging the world and creatively integrating your own desire for happiness with your desire for a better world. Instead of carrying out conventional daily routines (a.k.a. living on auto-pilot), this path requires a “discursive consciousness” (Giddens 1984) where you evaluate and reflect upon your values and intentionally choose actions that support them in the world. Despite the extra effort, this path is ultimately richer, deeper, more fulfilling, and it allows you to have your voice heard in this collective project of building a better world.

### **Lesson: Societies Are in a Perpetual State of Change**

Sometimes social patterns seem so persistent, so natural that it’s easy to forget how much things have changed in just a few generations. Society is in a constant state of flux—though the change is often imperceptible on a daily basis. Asking your grandparents how society has changed over their lifetimes reveals the shifting nature of society—more egalitarian gender roles, improved race relations, shrinking family size, and the globalization of the economy are just a few of the significant transformations over the last 50 years. Remember that our society is made up of human relationships and interactions and therefore can be recreated by human action. It is important to not *reify* societies, meaning to treat social realities as if they are unchanging and “natural.” After all, where would we be if abolitionists hadn’t challenged slavery? If suffragettes hadn’t demanded the right to vote? If labor activists hadn’t fought for safe working conditions and an end to child labor? Societies change—and it is people like you who can nudge it in the right direction.

## **TURNING INSIGHTS INTO ACTIONS**

Even if you have been persuaded by this piece, you might be thinking: “I don’t have the time or energy to ‘change the world.’” Almost all of us feel like we are too busy to take on something new. Creating social change requires varying levels of time commitments. Give the time that you have. You don’t have to be a saint or give up your whole life for a cause to make a difference.

Alternatively, you may be thinking “I don’t know enough about the issues” to get involved. Certainly, action without understanding is foolish but always

needing to “learn more” can be a crutch that lets you off the hook from ever taking action. Get active and you will learn more along the way. Every journey begins with a single step. You might think “I can’t make a difference, so why even try.” These kinds of mental traps serve the interests of the status quo by convincing us we are powerless. Consider the following story of how college students can make a real difference:

One spring at Luther College, a small group of friends got together and decided to attend a local conference on sweatshops—factories in poor countries where workers are abused and underpaid. They came back inspired and started a campus group committed to economic justice. The group decided to organize “Fair Trade Fest,” a small gathering in the student union that featured student musicians, short speeches on fair trade, and a table full of “fair trade products” made by artisans through the world (from [www.tenthousandvillages.org](http://www.tenthousandvillages.org)). The event helped educate and inspire students, faculty, and staff about building economic justice. The group grew slowly over the semester and the energy of the new people helped ignite a spark of creativity and action. The next campaign was to improve the lives of global workers who produce college apparel. After attending another conference and doing lots of research, they made an effective presentation to student leaders and administration to become a member of the Worker Rights Consortium <[www.workersrights.org](http://www.workersrights.org)>, which monitors the working conditions in factories around the globe. Next the group held a silent auction of student artwork to raise \$300 to invest in “microlending”—small loans given to the world’s poor to break them out of the trap of poverty (learn more at [Kiva.org](http://Kiva.org)). Few of these extraordinary, ordinary people considered themselves activists when they came to college. They are people who fit their activism in between exams and hanging out with their friends (actually they often hang out with their friends and do some of these things at the same time). They are people just like you.

## **PART I: CREATING STRUCTURAL CHANGE**

Social change occurs through myriad forces including population dynamics, natural disasters, and technological and economic transformations. Pursuing our vision of a better world requires a more intentional approach to change. At the macro level, social change is most likely to occur through collective action such as political organizing and social movements. Social movements inspire people to reconstruct their notions of what is possible and what should be done to create that possibility. Movement participants then integrate movement values into their lives and spread the movement’s message, as in the environmental movement. Movements also put collective pressure on decision-makers in

corporations and government to change the way they operate. Fundamental social change occurs when social institutions are transformed.

### **Actively Participate in Our Political System**

Political organizing and involvement help create structural social change. Politicians get to set an agenda for the society. They can jumpstart research into solar energy or give tax breaks to oil and coal companies. They can peacefully negotiate with other countries or invade them. They can help improve the lives of the poor or ignore them and give tax breaks to the most well-off and they can restrict or expand women's and gay rights.

For beginners, it's important first to register and then vote on a regular basis (every two years). It may seem like such a small thing, but it is essential to our democracy. The idealism so prevalent in young people could inject some much-needed change into our politics, yet voter turnout among students is generally quite low.

Advanced political engagement involves providing support to candidates who share your vision of a better world (giving money, canvassing, phone banking) and supporting organizations that lobby political leaders to implement public policy that reduces inequality, builds peace, and promotes sustainable use of natural resources.

- Register for an absentee ballot so that you can vote from your home/dorm/apartment.
- Check out Project Vote Smart ([www.vote-smart.org](http://www.vote-smart.org)) and League of Women Voters ([www.lwv.org](http://www.lwv.org)) for some valuable, unbiased information.
- Start a registration drive on campus. Take a look at Rock the Vote ([www.rockthevote.com](http://www.rockthevote.com)) for resources.

### **Join Social Movements that Create Long-Term Social Change**

Social movements consist of groups of people dedicated to pursuing a shared vision of a better community or world. Participating in social movements requires building solidarity with others who share common goals. It includes having conversations, going to meetings, spreading your message, and writing letters to the editor. The best place to start is to join an organization that is working hard on an issue you really care about.

Be sure to support organizations that address the root causes of social and environmental problems, in addition to ones that meet your community's immediate needs. For example, volunteering at your local homeless shelter has an immediate impact on people's lives (micro-level change), while working with the National Low Income Housing Coalition will help eliminate the need for homeless shelters (macro-level change). Donating money to a developing country suffering from famine is important, but so is giving to a group such as Oxfam



### Top 7 Organizations to Join/Start at Your Campus

1. ONE Campaign [[www.one.org](http://www.one.org)]
2. Student Global Aids Campaign (SGAC) [[www.fightglobalaids.org](http://www.fightglobalaids.org)]
3. Student Environmental Action Coalition (SEAC) [[www.seac.org](http://www.seac.org)] or Sierra Student Coalition [[www.ssc.org](http://www.ssc.org)]
4. Gay/Straight Alliance [[www.gaystraightalliance.org](http://www.gaystraightalliance.org)]
5. Student Peace Action Network [[www.studentpeaceaction.org](http://www.studentpeaceaction.org)]
6. Students Against Sweatshops (SAS) [[www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org](http://www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org)]
7. Amnesty International [[www.amnesty.org](http://www.amnesty.org)]

<[www.Oxfam.org](http://www.Oxfam.org)> that helps develop self-sufficient, long-term, sustainable economic development throughout the world.

### Top Campus Collective Action Campaigns

Organizing social change events takes time but can be fun and empowering. There is power in numbers! You may only spend a few years at your college but your actions while you are there can impact that campus for many years into the future. Lots of students are ready to get involved and are just looking for an opportunity to make a difference. Form coalitions with students groups—human rights, environmental, and diversity activists share many common values. Try mobilizing your campus faith communities—many students involved in such groups already put their faith into action, undertaking volunteer projects.

**Celebrate “Buy Nothing Day” on Campus.** “Buy Nothing Day” is an international event on the Friday after Thanksgiving (the most popular U.S. shopping day of the year) to publicize the effects of over-consumption on our families, culture, and the planet. Never underestimate the impact of “symbolic politics”—that a fun, thought-provoking event can effectively challenge dominant cultural notions. Learn more at <[www.adbusters.org/bnd](http://www.adbusters.org/bnd)>.

**Introduce “The Graduation Pledge.”** Encourage your fellow students to take the voluntary “graduation pledge”: “I pledge to explore and take into account the social and environmental consequences of any job I consider and will try to improve these aspects of any organizations for which I work.” The pledge is a great way to start conversations about how students want their work to contribute to a better world. Learn about how colleges/universities have integrated the pledge into their campus culture at <[www.graduationpledge.org](http://www.graduationpledge.org)>.

**Promote Fair Trade Coffee.** Campuses serve a lot of coffee to their hard-working, sleep-deprived students. Take action to ensure that coffee farmers are paid a fair wage. Ask your campus cafes and cafeterias to carry “fair trade certified” coffee. Learn more about “fair trade” from United Students for Fair Trade <[www.usft.org](http://www.usft.org)>.

and Co-op America's "Guide to Fair Trade" <[www.fairtradeaction.org](http://www.fairtradeaction.org)>. To find out what other colleges are doing visit: [www.transfairusa.org/content/support/campus.php](http://www.transfairusa.org/content/support/campus.php)

**Work to End Sexual Violence on Campus.** Sexual assault has long been a terrible problem on college campuses. You can help prevent rape by joining (or starting) your campus anti-rape group—your student health center should be able to point you in the right direction. Organize a Take Back the Night rally [[www.takebackthenight.org](http://www.takebackthenight.org)] or a V-Day event [[www.vday.org](http://www.vday.org)] to help spread awareness. If you are a man, consider how you might get involved (and involve other men) in this important work.

**Promote Tolerance and Diversity.** Chances are your campus has a variety of student groups that promote diversity, respect, and social justice. You can help by joining their organizations, attending their events, supporting their causes, and helping organize against bias and intolerance. Celebrate National Coming Out Day on October 11 [[www.hrc.org](http://www.hrc.org)]. Support targeted goals for your institutions about enrollment by first generation college students and domestic students of color. Teaching Tolerance [[www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org)] offers "10 Ways to Fight Hate on Campus" and "101 Tools for Tolerance."

**Green Your Campus.** From small projects such as getting recycling bins conveniently located in each dorm to big projects such as installing a wind turbine to produce "green energy," there are endless ways for you to make your campus more sustainable. As an easy starting point, consider getting your college to set up double-sided printers in your campus computer labs to default to print double-sided automatically. This one-time action can reduce paper usage nearly in half, saving forests worth of trees for years to come!

The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) <[www.aashe.org](http://www.aashe.org)> has amazing resources for environmentally friendly initiatives at colleges/universities including "green" building designs, recycling, alternative transportation, energy efficiency, and green energy. Encourage your institution to become a member of AASHE and lobby your president to sign onto the American College & University President's Climate Commitment to fight global warming <[www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org](http://www.presidentsclimatecommitment.org)>. Other great resources for greening college campuses include the National Wildlife Federation's "Campus Ecology" website: <[www.nwf.org/campusecology](http://www.nwf.org/campusecology)> and The Campus Climate Challenge <[www.climatechallenge.org](http://www.climatechallenge.org)>.

**Become a Sweatshop-Free Campus.** Student activists have effectively mobilized at universities across the country to demand fair working conditions for the workers who make products (particularly clothing) with their college's logo. One of the most powerful steps you can take to spread economic justice is to get your institution to become a member of the Worker Rights Consortium <[www.workersrights.org](http://www.workersrights.org)> which monitors working conditions at college apparel factories. Over 180 colleges and universities are members. Check to see if your

campus is one of them. If not, you can be the one to start the effort and make human rights the priority it should be. Learn more about sweatshops from: United Students Against Sweatshops <[www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org](http://www.studentsagainstsweatshops.org)> and Co-op America's excellent "Guide to Ending Sweatshops" <[www.sweatshops.org](http://www.sweatshops.org)>.

**Help Make College More Affordable.** To promote equality of opportunity, people of all races and social classes must have access to higher education. Collective action is necessary to increase government financing for higher education and to reduce the debt burden of graduating college students. Supporting the United States Student Association <[www.usstudents.org](http://www.usstudents.org)> will help their lobbying and organizing efforts across the country.

**Make Your College's Endowment Socially Responsible.** Help integrate your institution's mission and its investment practices. Consider a goal to invest 1% of your college/university's endowment in domestic and international "community investments" such as microlending and community development loans funds (e.g., Calvert Social Investment Foundation). You will unleash hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars to fight poverty throughout the globe. Learn more at: The Responsible Endowments Coalition <[www.endowmentethics.org](http://www.endowmentethics.org)> and the Sustainable Endowments Institute <[www.endowmentinstitute.org](http://www.endowmentinstitute.org)>.

Sociologists who study social movements know that before people will participate they must feel a sense of efficacy—they must believe that what they do could make a difference. Unfortunately, with any political or social movement participation you are never guaranteed the results you desire. Sometimes your action will appear to make little difference but in reality you can never accurately assess the positive effects of your actions. What we can accurately predict is that cynicism and inaction is a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you believe you can't make a difference, you won't.

## PART II: INDIVIDUAL ACTIONS

Engaging in social movements and politics is not the only way to create change. There are many actions you can take in your "private life" that will contribute to the creation of a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world. As we've indicated, social structure is comprised of actions taken by individuals. Social systems rest on the cumulative actions—and cooperation—of a majority of people in society. Similar to Gandhian non-cooperation, you can withdraw your support for aspects of the status quo and redirect your actions to support alternatives that are in-line with your values. For example, to challenge how children are socialized into gender roles, parents could avoid buying Barbie dolls (for girls) and violent toys (for boys), replacing them with gender-neutral and nonviolent alternatives.

One of the biggest challenges is to figure out how to integrate making a better world and living a meaningful, enjoyable life. First off, you don't have to follow some pre-designed path for making the world better. Living a reflective, vital life means making a commitment to living out your core principles. This commitment is a lifelong challenge to integrate your desire to create a better world with your daily actions—leading to a truly meaningful life. As Mohandas K. Gandhi, the renowned practitioner of nonviolence, famously expressed, “you must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

**Buy Less Stuff.** In essence, *live simply*. Find pleasure in your relationships, work, and passions instead of in the make-believe worlds that Madison Avenue creates. The present advertising barrage promotes the idea that satisfying each of our desires is more important than contributing to the welfare of others and seeking deeper fulfillment—a very destructive message that ads convey 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Seek to liberate your consciousness from the impulse to consume. This act of mental self-defense will open up time and energy to more fully engage the world. For things you feel you must buy, try to buy used, durable, and reusable products rather than new, cheap, and disposable junk. Check out the Center for a New American Dream's “Simplify the Holidays” Campaign for more ideas ([www.newdream.org/holiday](http://www.newdream.org/holiday)).

**Watch Less TV.** It is time to renegotiate our relationship with television. The average American watches over four-and-a-half hours of TV per day (Nielsen Media Research 2006). Watching less TV is one step towards resisting commercialism and connecting with your community. It also opens up time for fulfilling activities like: spending quality time with friends and family, catching up on some reading, pursuing hobbies, volunteering, playing music, enjoying nature, exercising, playing with your dog, or just getting outside. Consider dropping your cable subscription.

**Vote with Your Dollars.** Every dollar you spend can be a vote for the world you want to live in. It's important to support farmers' markets, food co-ops, and local, independent businesses that spread wealth throughout your community and make it an interesting place to live. Whether it's groceries, electronics, or fast food, college students make powerful impacts as consumers. When you buy clothing from more socially responsible companies like Patagonia or Levi's and boycott harmful companies like Wal-Mart and Dillard's you cast a vote for a more just world. Look for the “fair trade” certification logo and check out Better World Shopper at [www.betterworldshopper.org](http://www.betterworldshopper.org) to find report cards that rate the social responsibility of many different companies.

**Study and Volunteer Abroad.** Over and over again our students tell us about the transformative power of studying abroad. Living in another culture will teach you things that no classroom experience ever could. We encourage you to seek out different cultures, beyond your national borders, to gain new insights into

the meaning of life and the multiplicity of realities that define people's lives. The cross-cultural interaction that comes from studying and volunteering abroad encourages understanding, builds compassion, and decreases the likelihood of destructive conflict including war.

Council on International Educational Exchange [[www.ciee.org](http://www.ciee.org)]

Volunteers In Asia [[www.via.org](http://www.via.org)]

The Peace Corps [[www.peacecorps.gov](http://www.peacecorps.gov)]

**Volunteer In-Country.** We also strongly encourage you volunteer within your own country, as a way of experiencing the diversity that makes up this vast nation. You'd be amazed at the difference you can make, the personal growth you can experience, and the strong bonds you can form when you work with others across the nation on projects dedicated to building stronger communities.

Americorps [[www.americorps.org](http://www.americorps.org)]

Habitat for Humanity [[www.habitat.org](http://www.habitat.org)]

Teach for America [[www.teachforamerica.org](http://www.teachforamerica.org)]

**Create a Giving Budget.** Even though as a student money may be tight, now is exactly the time to create a semester-based budget for supporting those organizations that are working to create the kind of world you want to live in. Here is the key. The amount you give is not important—\$50, \$20, \$10, or \$5—it doesn't really matter. What matters is that you begin creating this budget now and give it to a good organization every semester. You'll have plenty of time when you're older to consider giving \$100 or more. Your participation, like voting in an election, may seem small but it is, in fact, essential to the long-term well-being of these organizations.

If you really want to try something powerful, try being a microfinancier. You can fight global poverty by making loans as small as \$25 to the world's poor at <[www.kiva.org](http://www.kiva.org)>.

**Stay Informed.** It's not always easy to stay informed with high quality information about what's going on in the world when you're in a constant cycle of working, studying, eating, learning, and (just maybe) sleeping in college. Public radio, alternative magazines, and a few, select TV shows can provide the solid investigative journalism you need. Make it a habit to learn about the pressing issues of the day. This knowledge will provide a foundation for informed action. Magazines such as *Mother Jones* offer hard-hitting stories often absent from mainstream news coverage. PBS programs like Frontline produce fascinating documentaries about a variety of contemporary social issues.

National Public Radio [[www.npr.org](http://www.npr.org)]

Public Radio International [[www.pri.org](http://www.pri.org)]

*The New York Times* [[www.nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com)]

*Mother Jones* [[www.motherjones.com](http://www.motherjones.com)]

*Ode* [[www.odemagazine.com](http://www.odemagazine.com)]

Frontline [[www.pbs.org/frontline](http://www.pbs.org/frontline)]

**Challenge Your Stereotypes.** Given the power of social context over our beliefs, it is virtually impossible to avoid being infected by some degree of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Stereotypes about racial and ethnic minorities, lesbians and gay men, women, immigrants, and others abound, even if many people know such views are unfair. This is less a personal failing than a public issue. Examining your own prejudices requires courage but can transform your relationships. Avoid slang that denigrates other groups—"fag," "gay," "homo," "bitch," and racial slurs may be the vernacular of the day, but using such words belittles women and men alike. Along similar lines, complaining about "illegal" immigrants without understanding the sociological forces at work demonstrates ignorance.

**Eat Green.** Tweaking eating habits is an easy way to make a daily difference. Eating less fast food, buying some organic food, and eating less meat are all ways to make environmentally friendly food choices. Not only is fast food bad for your health, the industry promotes intensive, destructive farming practices. Certified organic food may be a bit more expensive but ensures that producers have not used chemical pesticides, hormones, genetic modification, steroids, or antibiotics. Meat production, especially beef, requires tremendous amounts of land, water, and fossil fuels.

*Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* by Eric Schlosser.  
New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.

**Be a Mentor.** Helping kids develop into responsible, caring young women and men is one of the most powerful (and most fulfilling) actions you can take. Attention from compassionate adults is one of the best ways to keep kids out of trouble and help them become successful young adults. Volunteer at an after-school program, be a Big Brother or Big Sister, or help out at your local Boys or Girls Club.

Big Brothers Big Sisters [[www.bbbsa.org](http://www.bbbsa.org)]

Boys and Girls Clubs [[www.bgca.org](http://www.bgca.org)]

**Work for Justice.** As you look for employment consider that there are many opportunities to work with organizations whose sole purpose is to make the world a better place. Nonprofit organizations desperately need the skills you are developing in college. They need computer programmers, marketing services, administrative staff, and social service workers. You can focus virtually any interest you have into a job that promotes justice.

Idealist <[www.idealists.org](http://www.idealists.org)>

Environmental Career Opportunities <[www.ecojobs.com](http://www.ecojobs.com)>

Nonprofit Career Network <[www.nonprofitcareer.com](http://www.nonprofitcareer.com)>

**Choose a Fuel-Efficient Car—and Drive It Less.** People across the political spectrum finally acknowledge the threat of global warming. Sports utility vehicles and gargantuan trucks may be in vogue, but 10–15 miles per gallon isn't doing the atmosphere any favors. When you pick out a car, add fuel-efficiency to considerations like cost and preference and try to get a car that gets at least

30 miles per gallon. Not only will it improve air quality and reduce carbon emissions but your fuel-efficient car will save you thousands and thousands of dollars in reduced gasoline bills. To compare cars and find tips on driving efficiently check out [www.fueleconomy.gov](http://www.fueleconomy.gov).

**Green Your Home.** When you finally settle in one place for a bit, take steps to make your home energy efficient. Many ideas are relatively easy and inexpensive. Compact fluorescent bulbs, water heater jackets, and low-flow showerheads are simple ways to save energy and water and can be found in most hardware stores. NiMH rechargeable batteries for your remote controls, smoke alarms, toys, clocks and so on help reduce hazardous waste. Energy Star rated appliances save energy, and nontoxic cleaners reduce toxic chemicals. Composting your food waste recycles organic material back into the soil. Buying green power invests in renewable energy sources. Perhaps most importantly, living in the smallest home that meets your needs and living close to work if possible are crucial opportunities to save energy and reduce pollution.

Nontoxic cleaners: [www.seventhgeneration.com](http://www.seventhgeneration.com)

Energy Star: [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov)

Green power: [www.eere.energy.gov/greenpower](http://www.eere.energy.gov/greenpower)

**Share Housework and Childcare Equitably and Model Flexible Gender Roles.** Despite the fact that women increasingly work outside the home they still find themselves responsible for a disproportionate amount of housework and childcare. This “second shift” means women have far less leisure time than their male partners (Hochschild and Machung 2003). Men need to step up. Furthermore, given that we teach (or socialize) kids what it means to be boys and girls, try modeling flexible gender roles so they understand that women and men are equally capable at nearly any task. Trade off on various household tasks, show that it’s OK for both women and men to express a variety of emotions, and teach boys how to cook and girls how to fix the sink.

**Bank and Invest in a Socially and Environmentally Responsible Manner.** Socially responsible investing (SRI) has grown significantly over the past two decades. There are now a wide variety of community development banks, such as ShoreBank <[www.sbk.com](http://www.sbk.com)>, dedicated to economic development in low-income communities. Just switch your bank accounts and your money is doing good—24/7. On-line banking now makes it easy to use a bank in another town. There are also many mutual fund companies committed to social responsibility. Learn more about SRI at <[www.communityinvest.org](http://www.communityinvest.org)> and <[www.socialinvest.org](http://www.socialinvest.org)>.

## CONCLUSION

Years from now as you reflect upon your college experience we hope you fondly remember your introductory sociology course. More importantly, we hope you use your sociological imagination in whatever you pursue. Like many students,

you may have chosen Soc 101 because it fulfilled a general education requirement or fit your schedule, not because of some intrinsic interest in the subject. At times, the course might have seemed abstract and theoretical, in other words not “useful.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Not only have you learned to think sociologically, you now have a few tools to put your knowledge to good use. You understand that problems embedded in social institutions require structural solutions—we’ve armed you with some ideas and resources to engage in social movements working for long-term change. Just as importantly, you’ve learned that social institutions rest upon the actions of millions of individuals and that the path you take in your daily life is more than a personal choice—it is an opportunity for change. We hope you grasp that opportunity by joining together with others who share your vision for a better world and that you integrate this vision into your daily life.

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