



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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Introduction

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Aims and Goals

There are many excellent introductory readers to sociological theory out there. Why another one? The primary reason is that this is an Open Access textbook, free to you, the student, thanks to Oregon State University. We know that textbooks can be very expensive, and we think it is particularly problematic to charge students for access to work that has been published, in its original form, several decades ago. If you wanted, you could find all of the work included here in your local library, although you would have to put together many different books and articles. That is the second reason for this textbook – important passages have been collected for you, assembled here in one handy volume.

There are a few features unique to this particular selection of texts. First, when not originally published in English, they have been freshly translated for the 21st century student. Some license has been taken in making these translations, as described in more detail below. All work, even that originally published in English, has been represented for contemporary eyes. For example, although some may find this an editorial overreach, masculine pronouns have been changed whenever doing so does not detract from the original intent of the authors. Also, many passages have been shortened and ideas presented more simply than may be the case in the original. It is best to read the selections as very loose translations. More advanced students are welcome to read other more exact translations (or the original), and suggestions for finding these are included at the start of each passage.

Another unique feature of this volume is the inclusion of a section on early American sociological theory. It is often thought that American sociological theory did not really begin until well into the twentieth century. Although it is true that what we consider “classical” sociological theory came almost exclusively from Europe, there were quite a few American sociologists struggling with similar issues as those Europeans. More importantly, they read those Europeans. By including these early American sociologists here, we hope to provide you a better understanding of the context in which sociological theory was first advanced. It is hoped that a better understanding of the “greats” of classical sociological theory can be achieved by reading these Americans alongside Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber.

Why read classical sociological theory at all? There are a few reasons. First, knowing the “classics” in many ways makes one a sociologist. The concepts of Marx, Durkheim and Weber are our shared language, our common heritage as sociologists. Second, an introduction to classical sociological theory will help you think differently about the world. It *disciplines* the mind to see the world in a particular way, using the concepts and approaches of the sociologist. This new disciplined way of thinking is essential for conducting sociological research. As one of our eminent contemporary sociologists points out, “Questions are not generated simply by curiosity and imagination encountering the empirical world; they are generated by curiosity and imagination, *organized by theoretical assumptions and animated by normative concerns*,

encountering the empirical world.”¹ Without theory to guide us, we are likely to be overwhelmed with the complexity of empirical reality. Knowing theory is like carrying a vial of magic solution we can lay out on the ink of the world to see its hidden messages.

It is for this last reason, helping to shape our vision of the world so that we can conduct sociological research, that key passages in which these early sociologists discuss *what sociology is and how it should be done* are included and foregrounded. So, this textbook is more than just a bunch of outdated ideas from some nineteenth century Dead White Guys. It is a living and breathing repository of concepts and approaches that still to this day guide the conduct of all sociologists. If you read and pay attention, you too will be a sociologist, whether or not you ever go on to graduate training in the field. Trust me, this stuff stays with you for a very long time. Treasure it.

Organization Overview

Outline of the Textbook

The textbook is divided into four primary sections three of which correspond to a key theorist (Marx, Weber, Durkheim) and the fourth being a compendium of selections from early American sociologists. Each of the four sections begins with a descriptive biography (or set of biographies in the case of the American sociologists) and concludes with a “blank” index of key concepts.

As you read, take note of passages in which key concepts are discussed and fill in the index for your use. Between the biography and the index, you will find between ten and fifteen key passages, arranged chronologically for each theorist. Your instructor may point you towards which passages are most important for your particular course of study. It is not supposed that *all passages* have equal importance. Furthermore, your instructor may ask you to read these in a different order than that which is presented here. Think of this book as a reference from which your actual readings may be derived. Each passage includes a brief overview, an explanation of the original source and how to find it, and a set of questions to guide the reading.

Translating Passages

Each passage that you read has been translated by the author from its original text. These translations are not often *literal*(word for word) translations, but are meant to be concise and appropriate for college students today. Although the meanings have never been altered in these translations, sometimes the examples have been updated for a contemporary audience. This is especially true in cases where monetary units are

1. Erik Olin Wright, ed. 2005 *Approaches to Class Analysis*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, pg. 180.

employed. Line numbers are included on each selected passage page so that students and teachers can easily locate appropriate sections of the text. Original headings and subheadings have been retained so that the reader can easily move from this translation to any other translation, or the original.

There are a few other things to know about the way the translations are presented here. Because these are not literal translations, omitted words and sections are not always indicated by an ellipsis (...). Ellipses are only used when it is important to the meaning of the text that something has been omitted. In general, readers should always remember that this is an abbreviated non-literal translation. Sometimes, whole sections are summarized in the words of the translator, and these will be indicated by italicized font in brackets. You should never mistake these sections for the original text!

Information on the original source of each translated passage can be found at the beginning of each section. Readers interested in reading the full passage in context should follow the recommendations found in this paragraph.

Modernizing the Text

In keeping with contemporary practice, male pronouns have been changed throughout the text – “he,” “she,” and “they” have been substituted whenever such substitutions do not damage the original intention of the author. Thus, when Durkheim discusses the typical worker and uses the word “he,” the reader may instead find “she” in its place. On the other hand, when Weber discusses a typical Protestant entrepreneur of the seventeenth century, “he” is retained. Another modernization comes when referring to humans as “human animals” as distinct from “non-human animals.” This usage undercuts prior usage (humans vs. animals) which reinforced a false dualism between the two.

Some Useful History

All of the passages here were originally written in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Although the language has often been updated to make the meaning clearer to a contemporary reader, the historical examples used remain. Further, the theorists were trying to make sense of the world they saw around them – its origins and its current manifestations. So, it is important for you to know a little history before delving into the material. In some cases, the introductory passage to a given selection may provide relevant historical detail. A big picture understanding of major historical shifts, however, is needed as well. This section will supply an abbreviated overview of some of the historical events you will need to know to properly understand classical sociological theory. You may also refer to the included “Timeline” that shows the overlap between the lives of the theorists and major historic events. Also included are suggestions for further reading.

Ten Things Marx, Weber and Durkheim Took for Granted about the History of the World that You Might Want to Read More about

1. The land mass of Europe became a configuration of European “nations” only several centuries after the

Roman Empire first brought it together under a shared governance in the years in the first centuries of the millennium. After a period of “dark ages,” from the fall of the Roman Empire in the 5th century CE to around the 14th century, a viewer would find only scattered instances of political authority and little evidence of the existence of “nations” as we know them. During this time, **feudalism** emerged as the dominant economic system: most people (operating in family units) were legally bound to work for a lord or master, whose power was close to absolute over his territory.

2. Beginning with Charlemagne in the 8th century but continuing up until the 18th century CE, European nations emerged as distinct political entities, with rulers that we would consider “monarchs” through a system of hereditary succession. The monarch was often chief member of the aristocracy (rule by “the best”), a group whose power was ascribed by birth and whose property was passed on through hereditary succession. Feudalism continued to be the predominant economic system, although trade and commercial ventures slowly brought into being a new class, neither lord nor serf, housed in the new urban centers (“cities,” from which we derive the term **citizen**).
3. For many of these years, the aristocracy shared powers with the Catholic Church, whose presence preceded the rise of the new nations and monarchs. As the primary landowner on the European landmass, the Church was wealthier and more powerful than local rulers. The **Church** was also the primary educational institution, training young men in the arts and sciences of the Roman civilization, as well as theology.
4. There were many critiques of the power, wealth, and administration of the church, but none of them were as threatening as that which emerged from the priest **Martin Luther**, who famously nailed a list of grievances to the door of his local cathedral in 1517. Luther accused the church of literally selling salvation and forgiveness and he argued that the Bible should be translated into local languages so that people could read it for themselves. Lutheranism and **Protestantism** (those protesting the church) became known for advocating a personal relationship with God, without the interference or reliance on third parties (priests).
5. As nations emerged as distinct political entities with control over defined territories and wealth derived from increased trade, some monarchs began to chafe at the power of the Pope and the Catholic Church. King **Henry VIII** (Tudor) of England was the first to split from the church in 1532 when he was denied permission to divorce his first wife and remarry Anne Boleyn. As the **Protestant Reformation** swept Europe, civil and national wars broke out everywhere between monarchs and peoples who wanted to remain within the Catholic Church and those that wanted to follow Henry VIII’s path. By 1700, most of Northern Europe was “Protestant” while most of Southern Europe was “Catholic.”
6. All of these changes were taking place in a society that was increasingly commercial. In 1492, Christopher Columbus had stumbled upon the West Indies in his attempt to forge a trading route East to China and India. This precipitated a scramble by European rulers to seize land in the Americas, precipitating the creation of a global trading system based on slave labor and expropriation of land and goods from non-European peoples. Although initially led by Spain and Portugal, the Protestant Netherlands and England under the Tudors (beginning with Henry VIII but accelerating under his daughter, Elizabeth I) eventually dominated **global trade**.
7. As money poured in from the Americas, especially to the ports of Amsterdam and London, large-scale industrial enterprises were constructed to put the money to work, employing workers in large numbers to produce goods that could be sold to other global regions (such as China and India). Thus, nations, capitalism, Protestantism, slavery, and global trade emerged at a similar time in a similar place (15th-16th

century Northern Europe). As the need for workers in these large “factories” increased, feudalism slowly passed into **capitalism**. Serfs were no longer tied to the land but moved to where they could find work. English landowners began using their land as sites for factories or as places to raise large bodies of sheep whose wool could be processed in the emerging factories.

8. Historians call all of these changes in the 15th and 16th century the emergence of “**modern society**.” Later changes, such as **the industrial revolution** of the late 17th and early 18th centuries merely exacerbated the trends already in progress. There is currently some debate about whether we have moved beyond modern society to something “post-modern”, but we have yet no identifying name for this period. This is important to note, as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim were all seeking to describe what we now refer to as “modern society,” which, on a grand scale, may still be what you are living through now.
9. By the late eighteenth century, new political strains began to emerge. Monarchical rule was suited well to feudalism, but it did not seem as suited to this new global capitalism. Capitalists and traders were often not part of the aristocracy and did not feel represented by aristocratic rulers. There were many more people living in towns and cities who felt they should be politically represented. Some colonies, such as those in North America, also felt excluded from **political representation**. Hereditary succession seemed increasingly irrational, particularly in a society in which hard work and merit was leading to possibilities of social mobility. This led to a series of political revolutions (American in 1775, French in 1789) to create new democratic political systems.
10. At the time Marx was writing, these democratic political revolutions had stalled, at least in Europe. France wobbled between monarchy and republic (see more in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* introduction). German princes fought back attempts at instituting a popular vote. And yet, the writing on the wall appeared clear. **Representative democracy** was on the horizon. The world we now inhabit, capitalist and democratic, was the world in which Weber and Durkheim would grow up. Both would live to see the 1918 execution of one of the last ruling aristocratic families, the Romanovs. Today, “noble” families are largely titular, without real power.

Suggested Further Reading

If you would like to read more generally about the development of the “modern world system,” I suggest Immanuel Wallerstein’s four-volume series on the subject. *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century*(1976), *Mercantilism and the Consolidation of the European World-Economy, 1600-1750*(1980), *The Second Era of Great Expansion of the Capitalist World-Economy, 1730-1840s*(1989), *The Modern World-System: Centrist Liberalism Triumphant, 1789-1914*(2011). Other books that will give you a big picture view of world history are Patrick Geary’s *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe*(2002). James C. Scott’s *Against the Grain: A Deep History of the Earliest States*(2017), Kenneth Pomerantz’ *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (2000), Michael Mann’s *The Sources of Social Power* (2012), Chris Wickham’s *The Inheritance of Rome: A History of Europe from 400 to 1000* (2009), and David Graeber’s *Debt: The First 5,000 Years*(2011).

There are many excellent books about specific aspects of modern European history. The following are a few suggestions: Jonathan Dewald's *Setting the People Free: The Story of Democracy*(2005), Simon Schama's *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*(1989). Norbert Elias' *The Court Society*(1983) and *The Civilizing Process*(1978).

If you want to reach out of Europe (and perhaps beyond the knowledge base of the early theorists you are reading here), I suggest Vijay Prashad's *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World*(2007), Janet Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony: The World System AD 1250-1350*(1991), Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*(1972), and Andre Gunder Frank's *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age*(1998).

There are also some very good books on the history of sociology as a discipline. If you are interested in understanding the place of Marx, Weber, and Durkheim, and how we have come to assign them "classical" status, read Peter Baehr's *Founders, Classics, Canons: Modern Disputes over the Origins and Appraisal of Sociology's Heritage*(2002) and Daniel Levine's *Visions of the Sociological Tradition* (1995). For more on our classical theorists, read Raul Fernandez's *Mappers of Society: The Lives, Times, and Legacies of Great Sociologists* (2003). For a nice introduction to the meaning of sociology, with some attention to its historical context, read Norbert Elias' *What is Sociology?* (1978). For a counter-history of sociology that sees its roots in radical activism, read Joe Feagin and Hernan Vera's *Liberation Sociology*(2008). For more on early American sociology, read Charles Page's *Class and American Sociology: From Ward to Ross*(1969) and the early chapters of Stephen Turner's *American Sociology: From Pre-Disciplinary to Post-Normal*(2014).

Timeline of Marx's Life and Work

1818	May 5	Born in Trier, Prussia
1820	November 20	Longtime collaborator, Friedreich Engels, born in Barmen, Prussia
1835		Enrolls in University of Bonn, as a law student
1836		Transfers to college in Berlin; engaged to Jenny von Westphalen
1841		PhD, University of Jena; begins writing articles for local newspaper
1843	June 19	Marries Jenny von Westphalen; they move to Paris
1844		Daughter Jenny Caroline born in Paris (May 1 st); meets Engels (August 28 th); spends winter writing the <i>Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts</i>
1845		Expelled from Paris and moves to Brussels; daughter Jenny Laur born (September 6 th); writes <i>Theses on Feuerbach</i> and <i>The German Ideology</i>
1847		Participates in first congress of Communist League in London; Son Edgar born in Brussels (December 17 th)
1848		YEAR OF REVOLUTIONS. <i>Communist Manifesto</i> published; arrested in Brussels; works as editor of newspaper
1849		Marxes move to London after spending some time in Cologne; Son Henry Edward Guy (" Guido ") born (will die within the year)
1851		Daughter Jenny Eveline Frances (" Franziska ") born (will die next year)
1852		Began writing for <i>New York Daily Tribune</i> , as European correspondent
1855		Daughter Jenny Julia Eleanor born in London (January 16 th); Edgar dies of gastric fever (April 6 th)
1857		Child born and dies
1859		Publication of <i>A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy</i>
1864		Became involved with International Workingmen's Association (First International)
1867	September 14	Publication of first volume of <i>Das Kapital</i>
1868		Laura married Paul Lafargue, French socialist
1871		Publication of <i>The Civil War in France</i> , a defense of the Paris Commune
1872		Jenny married Charles Longuet, French journalist and activist
1876		Grandson Jean Laurent Frederick "Johnny" Longuet born; eventually becomes a leader of the Socialist Party of France
1879		Grandson Edgar "Wolf" Longuet born, becomes doctor and activist
1881	December 2	Jenny von Westphalen dies after long illness
1883		Jenny dies in Paris (January 11 th); Marx dies (March 14 th)

Timeline of Durkheim's Life and Work

1858	April 15	Born in Epinal, Lorraine, France
1866	September 2	Birth of future wife, Louise Julie Dreyfus, in Paris, France
1875		After graduating from secondary school, moves to Paris to prepare for entry into college
1879		Accepted to prestigious École Normale Supérieure
1883		After receiving state teaching qualification in philosophy, moves to Sens as teacher
1887		Marries Louise Julie Dreyfus' moves to Bourdeaux (professor of 'social science and pedagogy')
1888	September 8	Birth of daughter, Maria Bella
1892		Receives PhD
1892	September 18	Birth of son, André-Armand
1893		Publication of <i>The Division of Labor</i> (doctoral dissertation)
1895		Publication of <i>The Rules of Sociological Method</i>
1897		Publication of <i>Suicide</i>
1898		First issue of <i>L'Année sociologique</i> (Durkheim's journal)
1902		Moves to Paris; begins teaching at Sorbonne, Paris
1912		Publication of <i>The Elementary Forms of Religious Life</i>
1913		Becomes Professor of "Education and Sociology" at Sorbonne
1914		France enters World War I
1916		André killed in battle; Durkheim suffers deep depression
1917	November 15	Dies of complications following stroke, in Paris, France

Timeline of Weber's Life and Work

1864	April 21	Born in Erfurt, Saxony, Prussia
1889		PhD, University of Berlin
1893		Married Marianne Schnitger (a second cousin)
1894		Appointed Professor of Economics, University of Freiburg
1896		Appointed Professor, University of Heidelberg
1897		Death of Max Weber, Sr.
1899		Left work for five years, following depression and insomnia
1903		Formally resigned professorship
1904		Publication of <i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i> ; Visits United States
1907		Inheritance; becomes financially independent
1909		Co-founded the German Sociological Association (served as treasurer)
1916		Publication of <i>The Religion of China</i> and <i>The Religion of India</i>
1920	June 14	Dies in Munich, Bavaria, Germany (of the flu)

Major Themes

There are a few major themes that come up over and over again during the course of classical sociological theory's development. All three classical theorists were writing at a time when sociology was a new and emerging discipline. This new discipline was called forth by momentous social changes taking place in European (and American) society during this time period. These changes were related to the rise of capitalism, industrialization, and new political representation for the majority of people (or, at least, a desire for such by many). Calls for socialism emerged as a response to recognition of new social divisions. Each of the three theorists you will read here weighed in on these historical changes, theorizing the contours and dynamics of this new "modern" society.

The first theme that clearly emerges from the theorists is the theme of modern society itself. Each of our theorists has a different name for this new society, one that exemplifies what the theorist thought was distinct and novel about it. For Marx, the new society is a *bourgeois society*, one in which class relations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat are particularly fraught and stark. Marx calls this modern *mode of production capitalism*. For Durkheim, the new society is a result of increased population and contact between people (through advanced forms of transportation and communication). He calls this modern society an *organic solidarity* society, or sometimes a "segmented" society. Its distinguishing feature is an increased specialization and division of labor, apparent in every aspect of social life. For Weber, modern society is characterized by its hard-nosed rationality, bureaucratic authority structures, and a general dreariness of life. The American sociologists of this time drew inspiration from all three of these visions as well. Veblen, for

example, characterized modern society as one of intense “conspicuous consumption,” where people jockeyed for position by the houses they bought, clothes they wore, and vacations they took. For Ross, the modern era was one of intense class conflict, brought about by advanced capitalism.

The second theme that emerges is related to the first. Rather than merely describe this emerging society, each of our theorists offered explanations for how it arose in the first place. Thus, classical sociological theory was as much about offering theories of historical change (what, at the time was noted as *social dynamics*) as it was about describing how society works. Weber has a very famous explanation for how capitalism and bureaucracy came to rule in the West, which you will read all about in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The explanation advanced there is cultural and institutional – things change and develop the way they do because of previous institutional and cultural patterns. Weber’s explanation is in contrast to the materialist explanation offered by Marx, who saw history advance through conflicts over economic resources and power. According to Marx, history is a succession of *modes of production*, particular configurations which work for awhile until the class conflict they generate becomes too much to tolerate. In contrast to the idealist and materialist theories of change, Durkheim explained historical change as largely an unintended byproduct of demographic shifts and technological advances. As populations grow more dense, pressure is put on them to adapt in ways that minimize conflict.

The third theme that emerges is how theorists described and explained divisions operating within society. We have already seen that Marx saw class conflict as endemic to just about every society that has ever existed heretofore (an exception being early humankind, prior to the advent of agricultural settlements). For Marx, the conflict between those who own and monopolize profit-generating resources and those who must work for a living was the fundamental driver of historical change. It was also the explanation for much that happened in any given society. Our ideas, culture, law, norms, practices – you name it – were merely epiphenomena resting on the base of material distributions. Weber’s ideas in this area could not be further from Marx’s. He very clearly dismissed the idea that money, economic power, and material distributions were at the root of all social divisions. For Weber, class was but one axis of stratification, and, in many societies, the least important one. People found other ways to distinguish themselves from each other. One’s status could be based on birth (a noble family, a particular racial or ethnic group identity), honor (martial prowess), or profession/occupation. People also stratified themselves politically, by party affiliation. Durkheim, while recognizing the importance of class generally, believed that advanced specialization and division of labor pushed modern society away from class conflict and towards individualization. To the extent that we discriminate against people or favor some people based on skin color, biological sex, gender identity, or social background of their parents, we are preventing the division of labor from functioning properly. In a perfect world, the only social divisions would be those that correctly mirror natural inequalities.

These contrasting beliefs about the relative tractability and source of social divisions have a lot to do with how each classical sociological theorist thought about the politics of his day, particularly the question of socialism. For it must be understood by today’s reader that the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was an era where capitalism was fiercely debated, and socialism was offered as a real potential alternative. There had as yet been no Russian Revolution, no rise of Stalin, no fear of a totalitarian state. There wasn’t even a welfare state as we have come to understand it. Taxes were low or non-existent, public education was scarce, and there was very little public assistance on offer. Giant corporations went largely unregulated. It wasn’t until the publication of Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* in 1904 that the public began clamoring for some regulation and oversight of the food industry. It may be fair to say that a majority

of intelligent thinkers during this period thought something should be done to rein in the depredations of capitalism. Marx obviously went the furthest in this regard, co-authoring the *Communist Manifesto* which called for the immediate overthrow of capitalism and private property. Today's reader might be surprised to see what is actually advocated in the Manifesto – free public education, a federal postal system, and a few other things that we now take for granted. Both Weber and Durkheim also weighed in on the possibilities of socialism and reformation of capitalism, as did many of the American sociologists.

The final and perhaps most important theme for our purposes is that of *sociology itself*, and this is related to what has been said about the political views of the early sociologists. The connection between the aims and goals of this new discipline and political reform is most visible in the work of Durkheim (and French sociology in general). Durkheim believed sociology could be the science of society – like a physician, it could literally diagnose its ills and tell us what we should do to improve its health. Thus, description of how society worked was connected, for Durkheim, with how society *could and* perhaps should be improved. This makes reading Durkheim exciting and at times controversial. In contrast, Weber (and German sociology in general) did not see sociology as an ameliorative science in this way. Instead, sociology was about understanding how individuals made decisions in society and with what consequences, for the purpose of predicting future behavior and actions. The two approaches to sociology could not be more different. Where Durkheim focuses on *social facts*, Weber focuses on *social action*. Marx, writing before the origin of sociology as a term, has little to say in this regard, although we can see his descriptions and analyses made for change in a similar light to Durkheim. The connection of sociology to social reform versus sociology as a predictive science can also be seen in the differences among American sociologists during this era. As sociology was literally being defined into existence during this time, how particular sociologists defined its subject matter and its goals have had lasting effects on the work sociologists do today.

These five themes – describing and naming “modern” society, theorizing historical changes and the rise of this modern society, explaining social divisions, weighing in on the promise (and perils) of the socialist alternative, and proposing parameters for the new emerging field of sociology – recur throughout the readings chosen for this textbook. If you get lost in the reading, return to these five themes to find your way through. Pay attention to the similarities and differences in how each of the theorists frame and develop the theme. In this way, you will find your own path as a sociologist. I wish you a very good journey!

Allison L. Hurst

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