



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

I. Charles Horton Cooley, “Social Consciousness” (1907)

“Self and society go together, as phases of a common whole.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from an article published by Charles Horton Cooley in 1907. The entire article is entitled “was published in the American Journal of Sociology in March 1907 (volume 12, number 5, pp, 675-694). It has been abbreviated for publication here.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Cooley is well-known as the originator of the concept of the “looking glass self,” the idea that our notions of our individual selves are actually formed by observing how others perceive and respond to us. In this article, Cooley describes the existence of the “social mind.” When reading, think about how Cooley connects this with the issue of social reform. Compare him to Durkheim in both respects.

Social Mind in General

Mind is an organic whole made up of co-operating individualities, in somewhat the same way that the music of an orchestra is made up of divergent but related sounds. No one would think it necessary or reasonable to divide the music into two kinds— that made by the whole and that of particular instruments; and no more are there two kinds of mind—the social mind and the individual mind. When we study the social mind, we merely fix our attention on larger aspects and relations, rather than on the narrower ones of ordinary psychology.

The unity of the social mind consists, not in agreement, but in organization, in the fact of reciprocal influence or causation among its parts, by virtue of which everything that takes place in it is connected with everything else, and so is an outcome of the whole. Whether, like the orchestra, it gives forth harmony may be a matter of dispute, but that its sound, pleasing or otherwise, is the expression of a vital cooperation, cannot well be denied.

Social and Individual Aspects of Consciousness

In the social mind we may distinguish – very roughly, of course, – conscious and unconscious relations. The unconscious relations are those of which we are not aware; which, in one way or another escape our notice. A great part of the influences at work upon us are of this character. Our language, our mechanical arts, our government and other institutions, we derive chiefly from people to whom we are but indirectly and unconsciously related. And although the growth of social consciousness is perhaps the greatest fact of history, it has still but a narrow and fallible grasp of human life. Social consciousness, or awareness of society, is inseparable from self-consciousness, because we can hardly think of ourselves excepting with reference to a social group of some sort, nor of the group except with reference to ourselves. The two things go together, and what we are really aware of is a, more or less complex personal or social whole, of which now the particular, now the general aspect is emphasized.

The “I”-consciousness does not explicitly appear until a child is about two years old, and, when it does appear, it comes in inseparable conjunction with the consciousness of other persons and of those relations which make up a social group. It is, in fact, simply one phase of a body of personal thought which is self-consciousness in one aspect and social consciousness in another.

Self and society go together. as phases of a common whole. I am aware of the social groups in which I live as immediately and authentically as I am aware of myself; and Descartes might have said “you think” or “we think,” on as good grounds as he said “*I think therefore I am*”.

But it may be said this very consciousness that you are considering is, after all, located in a particular person, and so are all similar consciousness, so that what we see, if we take an objective view of the matter, is merely an aggregate of individualities, however social those individualities may be. Common-sense, most people think, assures us that the separate person is the primary fact of life.

If so, it is because common-sense has been trained by custom to look at one aspect of things and not another. Common-sense, moderately informed, assures us that the individual has her being only as a part of a whole. What does not come by heredity comes by communication and intercourse; and the more closely we look, the more apparent it is that separateness is an illusion of the eye, and community the inner truth. “Social organism”– using the term in no technical sense, but merely to mean a vital unity in human life–is a fact as obvious to enlightened common- sense as individuality.

There is, then, no mystery about social consciousness. The view that there is something recondite about it, and that it must be dug for with metaphysics and drawn forth from the depths of speculation, springs from a failure to grasp adequately the social nature of all higher consciousness. What we need in this connection is only a better seeing and understanding of rather ordinary and familiar facts.

Social Will

Social will differs from public opinion only in implying a more continuous and efficient organization. It is merely public opinion become an effective guide to social development.

It is quite plain that the development of the past has been mostly blind and without human intention. Any page of history shows that men have been unable to foresee, much less to control, the larger movements of life. Statesmen have lived in the present, having no purpose beyond the aggrandizement of their own country, their order, or their family. Such partial exceptions as the American Constitution are confined to recent times and excite a special wonder. Will has been alive only in details, in the smaller courses of life, while the larger structure and movement has been subconscious, erratic, and wasteful. The very idea of progress, of orderly development on a great scale, is of recent origin and diffusion.

At the present day, also, social phenomena of a large sort are for the most part not willed at all, but are the unforeseen result of diverse and partial endeavors. It is seldom that any large plan of social action is intelligently drawn up and followed out. Each interest works along in a somewhat blind and selfish manner, grasping, fighting, and groping. As regards general ends most of the energy is wasted; and yet a sort of advance takes place, more like the surging of a throng than the orderly movement of troops. Who can pretend that the American people, for example, are guided by any clear and rational plan in their economic, social, and religious development? They have glimpses and impulses, but hardly a will, except on a few matters of near and urgent interest.

In the same way, the ills that afflict society are seldom will by any one or any group but are the products of acts of will having other objects: they are done, as someone has said, rather with the elbows than with the fists. There is surprisingly little ill-intent, and the more one looms into wrong-doing, the less she finds of that vivid *chiaroscuro* of conscious goodness and badness her childish teaching has led her to expect.

Take, for instance, a conspicuous evil like the sweating system in the garment trades of New York and London. Here are people, largely women and children, forced to work twelve, fourteen, sometimes sixteen, hours a day, in the midst of dirt, bad air, and contagion, suffering the destruction of home life and decent nurture; and all for a wage insufficient to buy the bare necessities of life. But if you look for sin dark enough to cast such a shadow, you will scarcely find it. The "sweater" or immediate employer, to whom we first turn, is commonly himself a workman, not much raised above the rest and making but little profit on his transactions. Beyond him is the large dealer, usually a well-intentioned man, quite willing that things should be better, if they can be made so without too much trouble or pecuniary loss to himself. He is only dosing what others do and what, in his view, the conditions of trade require. And so on; the closer one gets to the facts, the more evident it is that nowhere is the indubitable wickedness our feelings have pictured. It is quite the same with political corruption and the venal alliance between wealth and party management. The men and women who control wealthy interests are probably no worse intentioned than the rest of us; they only do what they think they are forced to do in order to hold their own. And so with the politician: he or she finds that others are selling their power, and easily comes to think of it as a matter of course. In truth, the consciously, flagrantly wicked person is, and perhaps always has been, for the most part, a fiction of denunciation.

Thus it is not bad will, but lack of will, that is mainly the cause of evil things; they exist outside the sphere of choice. We lack rational self-direction and suffer not so much from our sins as from our blindness, weakness, and confusion.

It is true, then, as socialists tell us, that the need of society is rational organization, a more effectual social will. But we shall not agree with the narrowness of this or of any other sect as to the kind of organization that is to be sought. The true will of society is not concentrated in the government or any other single agent but works itself out through many instruments. It would simplify matters, no doubt, if a single, definite, and coercive institution, like the socialist state, could embrace and execute all right purposes; but I doubt whether life can be organized in that way.

The real ground for expecting a more rational existence and growth is in the increasing efficiency of the intellectual and moral process as a whole, not, peculiarly, in the greater activity of government.

In every province of life, a multiform social knowledge is arising and, mingling with the moral impulse, is forming a system of rational ideals which, through leadership and emulation, gradually work their way into practice.

The striving of our democracy toward clearer consciousness is too evident to escape any observer. Compare, for example, the place now taken in our universities by history, economics, political science, sociology, statistics, and the like, with the attention given them, say, in 1823, when, in fact, some of these studies had no place at all. Or consider the multiplication, since the same date, of government bureaus—federal, state, and local—whose main function is to collect, arrange, and disseminate social knowledge. It is not too much to say that governments are becoming, more and more, vast laboratories of social science. Consider also the number of books and periodicals seriously devoted to these subjects. No doubt much of this work is feverish and shallow, but this is incidental to all rapid change. There is, on the whole, nothing more certain or more hopeful than the advance in the larger self-knowledge of mankind.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Compare Cooley's notion of the social mind to Durkheim's notion of the collective conscience.
2. What is Cooley's point about the sweating system? Who is to blame?
3. How is it that "ethical organization" will advance society? Do you agree? What is the role of social science in this endeavor?
4. What is it about socialism that Cooley is in agreement with? In disagreement?