

# OUTLINE

## "Classical Social Theory and the Origins of Modern Sociology"

by

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I. **There are several myths about the development of modern sociology from its beginnings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Each of these has a rational kernel, but only that; on its face, they are incorrect.**

- A. The myth of a "watershed" between scientific sociology and prescientific social philosophy
  - 1. In this myth, the generation of 1890-1920 (especially Durkheim & Weber) play a key role – against the "prescientific" Marx, Comte, etc.
  - 2. Marxism has its parallel myth, with Marx being the first social scientist and Hegel, etc., as his philosophical background
- B. The myth of the problem of "order" as the key to most useful sociology
- C. The myth of the conservative origins of sociology, in the thought of early 19<sup>th</sup>-century intellectuals who reacted against the French and Industrial Revolutions
- D. The myth of a long-standing schism between "order" and "conflict" as key theoretical approaches in sociology

II. **The Problem of Order**

- A. Parsons originally identified this as the key concern for Durkheim
- B. Was originally posed by Hobbes as the problem of how self-interested individuals could form a peaceful society
  - A. A utilitarian philosophy [based in the notion that "good" is a matter of usefulness for individuals]
- C. Parsons was wrong about Durkheim
  - 1. D. thought Hobbes irrelevant because "the state of nature" was mythical and the social analysis should not start with myth [see below]
  - 2. Parsons misinterpreted the place of The Division of Labor in Durkheim's thought, which is much more concerned with German Idealist philosophy
    - 1. Division of Labor was actually an attempt to seek the social origins of individualism – something which Hobbes presumed to be "natural"
  - 3. Parsons then read Durkheim's "solution" to this [non]problem of order as the question of how to create "moral consensus"

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1. This ignores his [D's] concern with institutional analysis and institutional change
  2. Also his concern with non-revolutionary socialism
- D. Parsons rested his case for the centrality of the problem of order on its supposed role in Durkheim's thought
- A. Thus Parsons' case vanishes

### III. The Myth of Conservatism

- A. Several scholars, but most strongly Nisbet, see sociology as having its origins in the conservative reaction to the French and Industrial Revolutions
1. DeMaistre, Bonald, Chateaubriand, etc.: "Catholic Reaction"
  2. They were politically conservative, but more importantly used concepts that later sociology supposedly took over
- B. But a social theorist can be "conservative" in two senses
1. Can base his/her thought on conservative principles
  2. Can deduce conservative results from whatever principles s/he uses
- C. Actually, any good social thinker both synthesizes previous thinking and breaks with it.
1. Durkheim is no exception; neither is Marx
  2. Durkheim is thus conservative in neither of the senses above
    - a. Durkheim was most influenced by Saint-Simon, a leftist utopian
    - b. He was, indeed, concerned with the problem of the origins of morality
  3. Unlike the Catholic conservatives, however, he did not think that morality was built into the structure of the universe
  4. Unlike Kant (a German liberal/conservative), he did not think that morality could be grounded in individualism
    1. Both morality and individualism are social products
    2. The latter depends on an emerging functionally differentiated society: i.e., on the modern world.
- D. Nisbet fails to distinguish between moral individualism & methodological individualism
1. As conservatives oppose individualism, Nisbet thought that Durkheim's opposition to the latter was an opposition to the former.

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2. D. did not think that the former was an ontological given, so N. thought him opposed to it as well.
- E. Nisbet also only noted three possible schools: radicals (Marx), liberals (Mill & the utilitarians), and conservatives.
  1. Durkheim opposed the first two, therefore he "must" be the third
  2. This is a bad syllogism

### IV. **The Myth of Schism**

- A. Arose when Dahrendorf identified the "problem of order" as only one possible sociological problem, and proposed a contrasting "problem of conflict"
  - [we still see this in textbooks as an opposition between "structural-functionalism" and "conflict theory"]
- B. But Marx was no more concerned with "conflict" than Durkheim was with 'order"
  1. Both saw human nature as a social product
    - a. For Marx, "alienation" comes from social life, but he sees "man in nature" not as unalienated but as inhuman
    - b. For Durkheim, "anomie", "individualism" [and both mechanical and organic solidarity] come from social life; "natural man" is literally inconceivable.
  2. The differences between them stem from their differing analysis of society, not from a differing set of principles about what is important

### V. **Implications**

- A. These mistakes about the past have unhappy consequences for contemporary sociology
- B. Especially within American sociology
- C. Three issues:
  1. The problem of "positivism"
  2. The call for a "radical sociology"
  3. The sense that "order" has won out in the "order"/"conflict" schism, and an attempt to develop conflict theory in a more adequate fashion
- D. The latter two of these are best approached by means of a theory of industrial society

## VI. Theory of Industrial Society

- A. The myth of schism between "order" & "conflict" theories is a very poor way of understanding present society
  1. The Hobbesian way of formulating the problem of order is not the only way to do it
  2. Marx & Marxists are not really concerned with conflict but with analyzing capitalist society
- B. But the call for "radical sociology" [and the wish to develop a better "conflict" theory] are both tied to this schism, therefore it is misframed
  - A. We only need it if established sociology is "conservative"
- C. The key is to reject the established "Theory of Industrial Society"
  1. This theory starts with a distinction between:
    - a. "traditional" society (based on the dominance of land-owning elites)
    - b. "industrial" society (which is fluid, meritocratic, etc.)
  2. It imagines that class conflict occurs mainly during the transition between these societies
  3. Many versions in social theory:
    - a. Status vs Contract [Maier]
    - b. Mechanical vs Organic [Durkheim]
    - c. *Gemeinschaft* vs *Gesellschaft* [Tönnies]
- D. This theory has a profound anti-political bias
  1. Treats the State as subordinate to Society (or to the Economy)
  2. Sees change as the result of unfolding internal social factors (i.e., not external pressures)
  3. Sees economic development as primary
  4. Patterns "progress" on whatever country happens to be most economically advanced at the time
    - a. For Marx, that was Britain
    - b. For contemporaries, it is the U.S.
- E. Sociology needs to change if it to get past its 19<sup>th</sup>-century image of things
  1. Needs to erase much of the distinction between sociology & political science
  2. Needs to come to terms with globalization
  3. Should look at different "paths" of development

## VII. The Epistemological Status of Social Theory

- A. There is not a great divide between "pre-scientific" and "scientific" social thought
1. Even Durkheim's own methodological writings – which are positivistic – do not capture his own theoretical insights
  2. He was actually writing a philosophy of history
  3. So was Weber, though more openly
- B. But there is something true in all of these myths, esp. the myth of conservatism:
1. The founders of sociology were all responding to the social impact of the Industrial Revolution, as did the Catholic Reaction
  2. Because it was differently constellated in different countries, each "founder" responded differently to it
    - a. For Durkheim, the background was the conservative & Catholic reaction to the 18<sup>th</sup>-century *philosophes*
    - b. For Weber, it was neo-Kantian Idealism and the destruction of tradition through technical rationalization, [along with socialist opposition], a failed revolution (1848), and industrialization from above
  3. Conservatism and socialism thus both figure in the background of Durkheim & Weber's theories
  4. What Durkheim and Weber were really doing was rethinking liberalism!!!
    - a. Rejecting its utilitarian version as irrelevant to their societies
    - b. Noting the importance of cross-cultural awareness to social analysis
    - c. Including the resurgence of unreason in their analyses
- C. The myth of "scientific positivism" [empiricism] as the basis for a new scientific sociology thus fails to recognize that all social analysis is theory-laden
1. The problem is not to get rid of theory, but to develop an adequate theory for the contemporary world.
  2. [to paraphrase Marx: Previous sociologists have tried to abolish theory, the point is to change it]

*prepared 9/2001*

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*[ ] indicate outliner's extrapolations*