Module 7  Key Thinkers

Lecture 35
Sociological Theories: An Overview

Sociological theories are theories of great scope and ambition that either were created in Europe between the early 1800s and the early 1900s or have their roots in the culture of that period. The work of such classical sociological theorists as Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Vilfredo Pareto was important in its time and played a central role in the subsequent development of sociology. Additionally, the ideas of these theorists continue to be relevant to sociological theory today, because contemporary sociologists read them. They have become classics because they have a wide range of application and deal with centrally important social issues.

In this lecture, we shall discuss the context within which the works of the theorists presented in detail in later chapters can be understood. It also offers a sense of the historical forces that gave shape to sociological theory and their later impact. While it is difficult to say with precision when sociological theory began, we begin to find thinkers who can clearly be identified as sociologists by the early 1800s.

Social Forces in the Development of Sociological Theory

The social conditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were of the utmost significance to the development of sociology.

The chaos and social disorder that resulted from the series of political revolutions ushered in by the French Revolution in 1789 disturbed many early social theorists. While they recognized that a return to the old order was impossible, they sought to find new sources of order in societies that had been traumatized by dramatic political changes.

The Industrial Revolution was a set of developments that transformed Western societies from largely agricultural to overwhelmingly industrial systems. Peasants left agricultural work for industrial occupations in factories. Within this new system, a few profited greatly while the majority worked long hours for low wages. A reaction against the industrial system and capitalism led to the labour movement and other radical movements dedicated to overthrowing the capitalist system. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, large numbers of people moved to urban settings. The expansion of cities produced a long list of urban problems that attracted the attention of early sociologists.

Socialism emerged as an alternative vision of a worker's paradise in which wealth was equitably distributed. Karl Marx was highly critical of capitalist society in his writings and engaged in political activities to help engineer its fall. Other early theorists recognized the problems of capitalist society but sought change through reform because they feared socialism more than they feared capitalism.

Feminists were especially active during the French and American Revolutions, during the abolitionist movements and political rights mobilizations of the mid-nineteenth century, and especially during the Progressive Era in the United States. But feminist concerns filtered into
early sociology only on the margins. In spite of their marginal status, early women sociologists like Harriet Martineau and Marianne Weber wrote a significant body of theory that is being rediscovered today.

All of these changes had a profound effect on religiosity. Many sociologists came from religious backgrounds and sought to understand the place of religion and morality in modern society.

Throughout this period, the technological products of science were permeating every sector of life, and science was acquiring enormous prestige. An ongoing debate developed between sociologists who sought to model their discipline after the hard sciences and those who thought the distinctive characteristics of social life made a scientific sociology problematic and unwise.

**Intellectual Forces and the Rise of Sociological Theory**

The Enlightenment was a period of intellectual development and change in philosophical thought beginning in the eighteenth century. Enlightenment thinkers sought to combine reason with empirical research on the model of Newtonian science. They tried to produce highly systematic bodies of thought that made rational sense and that could be derived from real-world observation. Convinced that the world could be comprehended and controlled using reason and research, they believed traditional social values and institutions to be irrational and inhibitive of human development. Their ideas conflicted with traditional religious bodies like the Catholic Church, the political regimes of Europe's absolutist monarchies, and the social system of feudalism. They placed their faith instead in the power of the individual's capacity to reason. Early sociology also maintained a faith in empiricism and rational inquiry.

A conservative reaction to the Enlightenment, characterized by a strong anti-modern sentiment, also influenced early theorists. The conservative reaction led thinkers to emphasize that society had an existence of its own, in contrast to the individualism of the Enlightenment. Additionally, they had a cautious approach to social change and a tendency to see modern developments like industrialization, urbanization, and bureaucratization as having disorganizing effects.

**The Development of French Sociology**

Claude Henri Saint-Simon (1760-1825) was a positivist who believed that the study of social phenomena should employ the same scientific techniques as the natural sciences. But he also saw the need for socialist reforms, especially centralized planning of the economic system.

Auguste Comte (1798-1857) coined the term "sociology." Like Saint-Simon, he believed the study of social phenomena should employ scientific techniques. But Comte was disturbed by the chaos of French society and was critical of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. Comte developed an evolutionary theory of social change in his law of the three stages. He argued that social disorder was caused by ideas left over from the idea systems of earlier stages. Only when a scientific footing for the governing of society was established would the social upheavals of his time cease. Comte also stressed the systematic character of society
and accorded great importance to the role of consensus. These beliefs made Comte a forerunner of positivism and reformism in classical sociological theory.

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) legitimized sociology in France and became a dominant force in the development of the discipline worldwide. Although he was politically liberal, he took a more conservative position intellectually, arguing that the social disorders produced by striking social changes could be reduced through social reform. Durkheim argued that sociology was the study of structures that are external to, and coercive over, the individual; for example, legal codes and shared moral beliefs, which he called social facts. In Suicide he made his case for the importance of sociology by demonstrating that social facts could cause individual behavior. He argued that societies were held together by a strongly held collective morality called the collective conscience. Because of the complexity of modern societies, the collective conscience had become weaker, resulting in a variety of social pathologies. In his later work, Dukheim turned to the religion of primitive societies to demonstrate the importance of the collective consciousness.

The Development of German Sociology

German sociology is rooted in the philosopher G.F.W. Hegel's (1770-1831) idea of the dialectic. Like Comte in France, Hegel offered an evolutionary theory of society. The dialectic is a view that the world is made up not of static structures but of processes, relationships, conflicts, and contradictions. He emphasized the importance of changes in consciousness for producing dialectical change. Dialectical thinking is a dynamic way of thinking about the world.

Karl Marx (1818-1883) followed Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) in criticizing Hegel for favoring abstract ideas over real people. Marx adopted a materialist orientation that focused on real material entities like wealth and the state. He argued that the problems of modern society could be traced to real material sources like the structures of capitalism. Yet he maintained Hegel's emphasis on the dialectic, forging a position called dialectical materialism that held that material processes, relationships, conflicts, and contradictions are responsible for social problems and social change.

Marx's materialism led him to posit a labor theory of value, in which he argued that the capitalist's profits were based on the exploitation of the laborer. Under the influence of British political economists, Marx grew to deplore the exploitation of workers and the horrors of the capitalist system. Unlike the political economists, his view was that such problems were the products of an endemic conflict that could be addressed only through radical change. While Marx did not consider himself to be a sociologist, his influence has been strong in Europe. Until recently, American sociologists dismissed Marx as an ideologist.

The theories of Max Weber (1864-1920) can be seen as the fruit of a long debate with the ghost of Marx. While Weber was not familiar with Marx's writings, he viewed the Marxists of his day as economic determinists who offered single-cause theories of social life. Rather than seeing ideas as simple reflections of economic factors, Weber saw them as autonomous forces capable of profoundly affecting the economic world. Weber can also be understood as trying to round out Marx's theoretical perspective; rather than denying the effect of material structures, he was simply pointing out the importance of ideas as well.
Whereas Marx offered a theory of capitalism, Weber's work was fundamentally a theory of the process of rationalization. Rationalization is the process whereby universally applied rules, regulations, and laws come to dominate more and more sectors of society on the model of a bureaucracy. Weber argued that in the Western world rational-legal systems of authority squeezed out traditional authority systems, rooted in beliefs, and charismatic authority, systems based on the extraordinary qualities of a leader. His historical studies of religion are dedicated to showing why rational-legal forms took hold in the West but not elsewhere. Weber's reformist views and academic style were better received than Marx's radicalism in sociology. Sociologists also appreciated Weber's well-rounded approach to the social world.

Georg Simmel (1858-1918) was Weber's contemporary and co-founder of the German Sociological Society. While Marx and Weber were pre-occupied with large-scale issues, Simmel was best known for his work on smaller-scale issues, especially individual action and interaction. He became famous for his thinking on forms of interaction (i.e., conflict) and types of interacts (i.e., the stranger). Simmel saw that understanding interaction among people was one of the major tasks of sociology. His short essays on interesting topics made his work accessible to American sociologists. His most famous long work, The Philosophy of Money, was concerned with the emergence of a money economy in the modern world. This work observed that large-scale social structures like the money economy can become separate from individuals and come to dominate them.

The Origins of British Sociology

British sociology was shaped in the nineteenth century by three conflicting sources: political economy, ameliorism, and social evolution.

British sociologists saw the market economy as a positive force, a source of order, harmony, and integration in society. The task of the sociologist was not to criticize society but to gather data on the laws by which it operated. The goal was to provide the government with the facts it needed to understand the way the system worked and direct its workings wisely. By the mid-nineteenth century this belief manifested itself in the tendency to aggregate individually reported statistical data to form a collective portrait of British society. Statistical data soon pointed British sociologists toward some of the failings of a market economy, notably poverty, but left them without adequate theories of society to explain them.

Ameliorism is the desire to solve social problems by reforming individuals. Because the British sociologists could not trace the source of problems such as poverty to the society as a whole, then the source had to lie within individuals themselves.

A number of British thinkers were attracted to the evolutionary theories of Auguste Comte. Most prominent among these was Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), who believed that society was growing progressively better and therefore should be left alone. He adopted the view that social institutions adapted progressively and positively to their social environments. He also accepted the Darwinian view that natural selection occurred in the social world. Among Spencer’s more outrageous ideas was the argument that unfit societies should be permitted to die off, allowing for the adaptive upgrading of the world as a whole. Clearly, such ideas did not sit well with the reformism of the ameliorists.
Other Developments

Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) thought that human instincts were such a strong force that Marx's hope to achieve dramatic social changes with an economic revolution was impossible. Pareto offered an elite theory of social change that held that a small elite inevitably dominates society on the basis of enlightened self-interest. Change occurs when one group of elites begins to degenerate and is replaced by another. Pareto's lasting contribution to sociology has been a vision of society as a system in equilibrium, a whole consisting of balanced independent parts.

After his death, Marx's disciples became more rigid in their belief that he had uncovered the economic laws that ruled the capitalist world. Seeing the demise of capitalism as inevitable, political action seemed unnecessary. By the 1920s, however, Hegelian Marxists refused to reduce Marxism to a scientific theory that ignored individual thought and action. Seeking to integrate Hegel's interest in consciousness with the materialist interest in economic structures, the Hegelian Marxists emphasized the importance of individual action in bringing about a social revolution and reemphasized the relationship between thought and action.

The Contemporary Relevance of Classical Sociological Theory

Classical sociological theories are important not only historically, but also because they are living documents with contemporary relevance to both modern theorists and today's social world. The work of classical thinkers continues to inspire modern sociologists in a variety of ways. Many contemporary thinkers seek to reinterpret the classics to apply them to the contemporary scene.

Early American Sociology

Much of early American sociology was defined by the influence of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903); various strands of Social Darwinism; and political liberalism — with the latter paradoxically contributing to the discipline's conservativism. William Graham Sumner (1840-1910) and Lester F. Ward (1841-1913) exemplify these tendencies in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American sociological theory, but their work has certainly not passed the test of time. Other early American sociologists, especially from the Chicago School, did have an enduring impact on sociological theory. W.I. Thomas (1863-1947), Robert Park (1864-1944), Charles Horton Cooley (1864-1929), and George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) profoundly shaped the theoretical landscape of symbolic interactionism, and their ideas predominated until the institutionalization of sociology at Harvard University in the 1930s. While for many years sociologists have emphasized these three theoretical orientations, scholars of sociology have recently pointed to the significance of early women sociologists such as Jane Addams (1860-1935), Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), and Beatrice Potter Webb (1858-1943), as well as the race theory of W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963).
Sociology at Harvard, Marxian Theory, and the Rise and Decline of Structural Functionalism

Pitirim Sorokin (1889-1968) was a central figure in the founding of sociology at Harvard University during the 1930s. Sorokin was soon overshadowed, however, by Talcott Parsons (1902-1979). Parsons is a key figure in the history of sociological theory in the United States because he introduced European thought to large numbers of American sociologists and developed a theory of action and, eventually, structural functionalism. Parsons helped to legitimize grand theory in the United States, and produced many graduate students who carried his ideas to other departments of sociology in the U.S. The rise of structural functionalism to a dominant position in the 1940s and 1950s led to the decline of the Chicago School.

While structural functionalism was gaining ground in the United States, the Frankfurt school of critical theory was emerging in Europe. With the rise to power of Adolf Hitler and the National Socialists in Germany, many of the critical theorists fled to the United States, where they came into contact with American sociology. Thinkers such as Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor Adorno (1903-1969), and Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) propounded a kind of Marxian theory that was heavily influenced by the work of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), Max Weber (1864-1920), and Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Much of the critical theorists' work, however, was neglected until the 1960s.

During 1940s-1960s, many criticisms and challenges to structural functionalism emerged. Radical sociologists such as C. Wright Mills (1916-1962) and conflict theorists attacked structural functionalism for its grand theory, purported political conservatism, inability to study social change, and lack of emphasis on social conflict. Other theorists, such as Erving Goffman (1922-1982) and George Homans (1910-), developed dramaturgical analysis and exchange theory, respectively. The sociological phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1899-1959) prompted a great deal of interest in the sociology of everyday life, which is exemplified by Harold Garfinkel's (1917- ) ethnomethodology.

The Intellectual Legacy of Marxian Theory

During the 1970s and 1980s, a number of scholars revived Marxist perspectives in studies of historical sociology and economic sociology, while others began to question the viability of Marxian theory given the atrocities committed in the name of Marxism and the collapse of the Soviet Union and other Marxist regimes. Ritzer and Goodman suggest that neo-Marxian theory will see something of a renaissance as a consequence of the inequalities of globalization and the excesses of capitalism.

Late Twentieth-Century Social Theory

In the last thirty years or so, a number of theoretical perspectives have emerged. First, and perhaps most significant, is the rise of feminist theory. Second, structuralism, post-structuralism, and post-modernism gained considerable ground — most notably in the work of Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Third, in the United States, many sociological theorists have developed an interest in the micro-macro link. Fourth, the debate over the relationship between agency and structure — which developed mainly in Europe — has made its way into sociological theory in the U.S. Finally, in the 1990s a number of sociological thinkers have taken an interest in theoretical syntheses.
Early Twenty-First-Century Theory

While the future of sociological theory is unpredictable, a number of perspectives have come to the forefront in recent years. Multicultural social theory, for example, has exploded in the past 20 years. Post-modernism continues to be influential, though some post-post-modernists are making headway. Finally, theories of consumption are shifting the focus of sociology away from its productivist bias and toward consumers, consumer goods, and processes of consumption.

References


Questions

1. What are the main social forces in the development of sociological theories?

2. Explain the course of development of French sociology and the contribution of the main thinkers.

3. Who were the key thinkers of German sociology? Explain their contribution to sociological theory.

4. Explain the significance of Marxian theory with the rise and decline of structural functionalism.