Module 7  Key Thinkers

Lecture 40
Feminism and Sociological Theory

The contributions of female thinkers to classical sociological theory have generally been overlooked throughout the years, even though they systematically developed understandings of society similar to those of their male counterparts. However, the theories of these female thinkers are distinctive because they incorporate the standpoint of gender, focus on the lives and work of women, critically engage the problem of social inequality, and offer solutions to ameliorate social problems. This chapter discusses the work of several women theorists, activists, and social reformers, and it presents the case for why it should be included in the canon of classical sociological theory.

Harriet Martineau (1802-1876)

Martineau has come to be known as the "founding mother" of sociology for both her theoretical and empirical work. A prolific writer, Martineau published twenty-five didactic novels in a series called Illustrations of Political Economy; the first sociological research text, How to Observe Morals and Manners; three volumes on her field work in the United States, Society in America; and a book on her research in the Middle East, Eastern Life: Present and Past. She also translated and edited Comte's Positive Philosophy, a volume that was so highly acclaimed that Comte translated her rendition of his book back into French.

Martineau viewed the central concern of sociology to be what she called "social life in society," the patterns, causes, consequences, and problems of the social world. Like Comte and Spencer, she was a positivist who believed in social laws and the progressive evolution of society. According to Martineau, the most important law of social life is human happiness, and much of her work sought to understand the extent to which individuals developed "morals and manners" to achieve this end. Martineau used a comparative methodological approach to study the moral principles in different societies and to uncover the degrees to which these societies had progressed. She devised three measures to study progress, including the condition of the less powerful groups in society, the cultural attitudes towards authority and autonomy, and the extent to which all individuals were provided the tools to realize autonomous moral action. Unlike Spencer, Martineau was overwhelmingly concerned with gender, racial, and class inequality. For example, when researching the moral condition of America, Martineau focused on marriage patterns and slavery. She also studied the conditions of wage-earning women in Great Britain and the lives of the poor in her field work in the Middle East.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)

Gilman focused explicitly on gender stratification in much of her work, arguing that economic arrangements were to blame for the gendered division of labor in American society. According to Gilman, economic arrangements produced what she referred to as the "sexuo-economic arrangement": a master class of men and a subordinate class of women. She viewed the pattern of male domination over women as being rooted in their need to be recognized by an Other. Like Marx, Gilman believed that meaningful work is the essence of human self-realization. However, unlike Marx, Gilman was more concerned with how
women, rather than the working class, were alienated from their species being because they were isolated in private households performing nonproductive work. Gilman argued that the modern sexuo-economic arrangement of the male bread-winner and female homemaker was wasteful in terms of efficiency and productivity and that it exploited women both physically and emotionally. Her solution involved the economic emancipation of women and the rational dismantling of the household. The former involved opening up opportunities for women to work for wages in the public sphere, and the latter involved a professionalization of household work, such as child care and food service.

**Jane Addams (1860-1935) and the Chicago Women’s School**

Addams and the other women of the Chicago School viewed sociological theory and research as a means to reform society, particularly in terms of ameliorating social problems that were intensified by immigration, urbanization, and industrialization. Addams’ concept of the social ethic, individual action based on the welfare of the community, is characteristic of the work of all of these women. For example, Florence Kelley worked to educate consumers on how to use their purchasing power to help improve the working conditions of women wage earners, end child labor, and eradicate sweatshops. Like Addams, most privileged personal experiences and observations over pure theory and personally visited the communities they were trying to help. Indeed, Addams helped to create the Hull House, which was located in a Chicago working-class, immigrant neighborhood. There she and other social reformers lived and worked.

Addams envisioned society as a vast network of individuals coming together to realize their material and ethical interests in the name of social democracy. Like Simmel and Mead, she was more interested in micro-level social interaction than in social structures and institutions. Addams viewed the individual as an embodied subject with a mind capable of reason and emotion in a body that materially experiences the social world. She was particularly concerned with the emotion of kindness and with how individuals desired sociality. Her understanding of social change encompassed her belief that emotions, not just material conditions, could determine the evolution of society. Addams recognized that transforming social democracy from a political creed to a way of life faced two tensions: overcoming the belief in individualism and the difficulty of people collectively to understand one another's vantage point. She offered three strategies to solve these tensions: formally educating people to recognize the legitimacy of social democracy; informally encouraging people to interact with those outside of their own class, gender, and ethnicity; and using the historical memories of individuals to help them to re-discover their relationship with society.

**Anna Julia Cooper (1859-1964) and Ida Wells-Barnett (1862-1931)**

The work of Cooper and Wells-Barnett focused on the role power plays in social life, particularly in terms of understanding sexism and racism in American society. According to Cooper and Wells-Barnett, power can range in form from physical oppression to emotional manipulation, including coercion, ideology, material advantage, interactional norms, and communication. Unlike the other feminist theorists discussed so far, Cooper and Wells-Barnett gave little purchase to the themes of evolution and progress, and argued that domination and stratification are structurally pervasive in modern society. For example, Cooper viewed society as a system of institutions, stratified groups, and cultural aspirations. She believed that order in society could take two forms, domination and equilibrium;
however, regardless of whether a society is characterized by domination or equilibrium, it is never free of conflict.

**Marianne Schnitger Weber (1870-1954)**

The wife of Max Weber, Marianne's work on sociological theory had been forgotten until recently. During her lifetime Marianne Weber achieved recognition not only for her academic work but also for her political work. She became the first female member of parliament for Baden, in 1920, and the president of the Federation of German Women's Organizations.

Marianne Weber's central theoretical project was creating a sociology from the standpoint of women. Three issues informed her sociological theory: the need for female autonomy, the significance of women's work in the production of culture, and the situated and unique standpoint of women. She was particularly concerned with how well social institutions enabled or constrained women to realize these three issues. For example, Marianne Weber's study of marriage found that while men achieve greater autonomy and self-fulfillment through conventional marriage, women do not. She also critiqued Simmel's notion that men and women occupied different culture spheres: the objective male world of public achievement and the personal female world of inner self-development. Marianne Weber argued that this distinction failed to explain women's work in the household, and suggested that the home constituted a third dimension of cultural production — what she called the "middle ground of immediate daily life." She also debated Gilman's position that the only path to gender equality was through women leaving the household and becoming wage earners. Gilman's solution, according to Weber, did not take into account the various standpoints of females, whether they be homemakers or factory workers. Weber believed that the patriarchal household rather than the capitalist workplace needed to be reformed.

**Beatrice Potter Webb (1858-1943)**

A student and lifelong friend of Herbert Spencer, Webb became a leading Fabian socialist in Great Britain and a theorist overwhelmingly concerned with the problem of "poverty among rich." Webb first became a charity worker in order to study poverty, but she quickly realized that she was not so much interested in good works, but in understanding. After working with the poor, she came to believe that attempts to reform the capitalist economic system could be better understood by studying segments of the working class that were actively engaged in creating alternative economic practices, such as co-operatives. In her work, Webb was most concerned with the relationship between the state, the economy, and social classes. Unlike Marx, Webb viewed state intervention as necessary to control the economy, and she advocated gradual rather than revolutionary change.

**References**


**Questions**

1. Describe Harriet Martineau’s contribution to feminist sociological thought.

2. Discuss Marianne Schnitger Weber’s contribution to feminist sociological thought.

3. Elucidate Beatrice Potter Webb’s contribution to feminist sociological thought.

4. Discuss Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s contribution to feminist sociological thought.