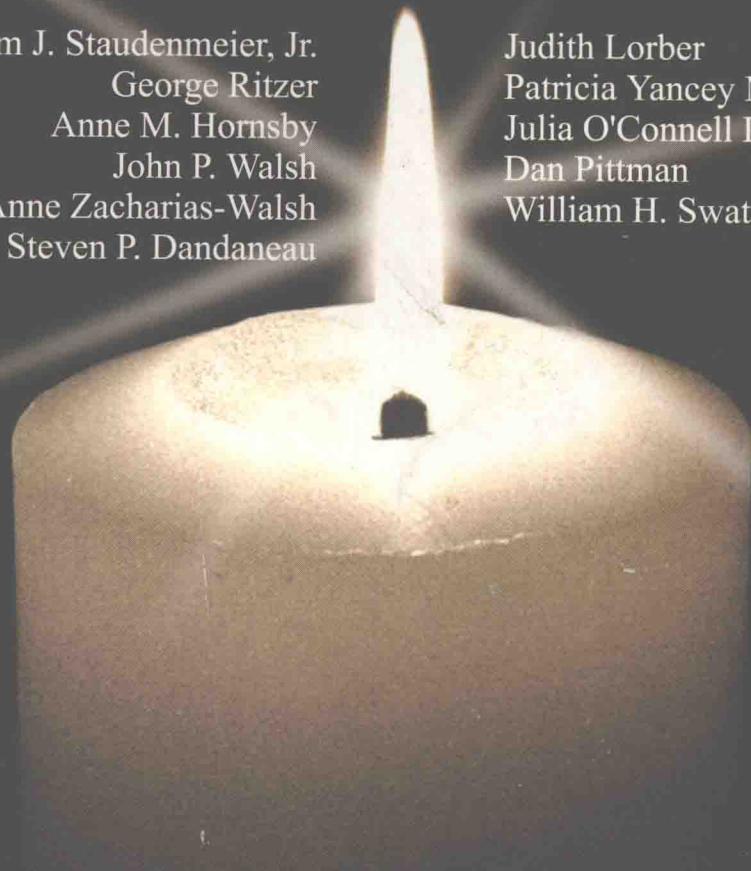


PETER KIVISTO

ILLUMINATING SOCIAL LIFE

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Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited

PETER KIVISTO

ILLUMINATING
SOCIAL LIFE

Classical and Contemporary
Theory Revisited



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P R E F A C E

The purpose of this book is to illustrate the importance of sociological theory to students attempting to make sense of the world they inhabit. By applying various social theories from the past and the present to selected facets of modern life, the authors who have contributed to this collection of essays share a common purpose: to illustrate how different social theories are capable of providing significant understanding that, without theory, would not be grasped.

I have taught social theory for 20 years and am very aware of the trepidation with which many students approach this seemingly mysterious or irrelevant subject. Indeed, this book is a direct response to the way students react to theory. All the contributors are equally aware of this anxiety. Indeed, aside from our one undergraduate coauthor, all of us have collectively amassed hundreds of years of experience teaching theory to thousands of undergraduates. Over the years, we have worked hard to get students at our respective home institutions to become comfortable with theorizing, while at the same time attempting to convince them of the value of theory. From experience, we have learned that one especially effective way to accomplish these goals is by the application of particular theories to concrete examples from everyday life.

Undergraduate students frequently have a difficult time appreciating the relevance of sociological theory. They all too often fail to see the connection of their theory courses to the “substantive” courses in the departmental offerings. Instead, theory courses are seen either

as excursions into the history of ideas or as exercises in overly abstract and arcane discourses that, they believe, can only be of interest to sociologists specializing in social theory. In short, students harbor suspicions about the value of social theory for them.

Although we can sympathize with this suspicion, all the contributors to this volume are convinced that theory is essential for anybody trying to make sense of the swirling events and perplexing circumstances all of us encounter in our daily lives. In fact, it's fair to say that without realizing it, everyone is a social theorist. The philosopher of science, N. R. Hanson, thought that this was the case when he wrote that, "All observation is a theory-laden activity" (1958, p. 3). By this, he meant that everyone, not merely social theorists, looks at the world through a variety of implicit theoretical lenses. These lenses afford angles of vision that allow us to see and interpret, in novel ways, aspects of the social world.

There are, however, major difference between everyday uses of theory and the sociological uses of theory. By pointing out that in the former case, theories are generally implicit, whereas in the latter they are explicit, I mean to indicate that sociological theories are subjected to examination to determine whether they are coherent, logically consistent, and empirically supported. Everyday theories are simply taken-for-granted assumptions about aspects of the social world that can prove to be more or less helpful in going about the business of our daily lives. They are generally not scrutinized in a critical and reflective way. In contrast, sociological theories are constantly tested to determine if they are actually applicable in any inquiry into aspects of the social world. If they prove to be inapplicable—if they do not further our understanding of whatever it is we are studying—they are discarded. Numerous theories in sociology have proven themselves, over time, to be invaluable tools for advancing the sociological imagination and for helping us to make sense of the social conditions that frame our lives. The essays assembled in this collection testify to this fact.

This volume contains ten chapters devoted to different theories. Part I contains four chapters that address aspects of the theories of the four scholars who are seen today as the most influential figures from the formative period in the history of sociology: Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx. Part II examines six contemporary theories that have had a profound impact on sociology in recent years. We make no claim to have included all the most

influential contemporary theories. This would require a multivolume book. The theories we do focus on include critical theory, feminism, interpretivism, dramaturgy, postmodernism, and globalization theory. Both parts of the book begin with a brief introduction that can serve to outline the general contours of the approaches taken by particular theorists and theory schools.

I stress that this book is not meant to be a substitute either for reading theorists in their own words or for more conventional social theory texts that survey the discipline in much greater detail. Rather, it is meant to function as a supplemental text that can be profitably used in conjunction with other readings. All the authors hope that by provoking and stimulating readers with engaging illustrative cases, many students will want to delve more deeply into social theory—and that they will do so without suffering from theory anxiety.

In preparing the manuscript for publication, I benefited from the input of a variety of people. First and foremost, I thank all the scholars who wrote chapters for the book. We have gotten to know one another rather well, despite the fact that many of us have never met face to face. I suppose it might be said that we are an example of the cyberspace communities that Anne Hornsby writes about in her chapter on “surfing the Net.” George Ritzer needs to be singled out for thanks because his earlier work on McDonaldization served as a model for the rest of us. Moreover, I thank him for allowing me to pick up a project that he, in fact, had initiated. Close to home, I thank my secretary, Jean Sottos, for all the work she put into the preparation of several chapters. I also express my delight in having had the opportunity to coauthor a chapter with one of my students, and a person with a bright future, Dan Pittman. At home, Sarah, Aaron, and Susan read and commented on one or more of the chapters and in other ways encouraged me along the way.

Once again, Steve Rutter has proven to be a creative and perceptive publisher. He not only has to be credited with the vision to pursue this project but his sustained involvement over time also made him a real part of the team that brought this book together. Other folks at Pine Forge assisted me in many ways, large and small, and to them I extend my heartfelt appreciation.

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C O N T E N T S

Preface

ix

PART 1: Classical Sociological Theory

Introduction

1

PETER KIVISTO

This introduction provides a brief overview of the enduring relevance of four major figures in the formative period of social theory: Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx

1. Alcohol-Related Windows on Simmel's Social World

7

WILLIAM J. STAUDENMEIER, JR.

Ranging from individual social action to large-scale social change, Simmel's major ideas are applied to historical and contemporary alcohol-related examples.

**2. The Weberian Theory of Rationalization and the
McDonaldization of Contemporary Society** **37**

GEORGE RITZER

Through the concept of McDonaldization, Weber's ideas about the rationalization of modern society are applied to the fast-food industry, which is seen as a model for an increasing number of sectors of American society.

**3. Surfing the Net for Community:
A Durkheimian Analysis of Electronic Gatherings** **63**

ANNE M. HORNSBY

Drawing on Durkheim's ideas about what creates stable and cohesive communities, this chapter analyzes whether electronic gatherings on the Net are new forms of community and whether humans are developing a new type of social relationship with computers.

**4. Working Longer, Living Less: Understanding Marx
Through the Workplace Today** **107**

JOHN P. WALSH and
ANNE ZACHARIAS-WALSH

Marx's theory of surplus value is applied to contemporary work trends, which involve an expansion of the workday without providing additional compensation.

PART II: Contemporary Theories and Their Connections to the Classics

Introduction 145

PETER KIVISTO

A sketch of major contemporary theories, this introduction stresses how theorists today build on past theories while at the same time going beyond them.

5. Critical Theory, Legitimation Crisis, and the Deindustrialization of Flint, Michigan 151

STEVEN P. DANDANEAU

Germany's leading social theorist, Jürgen Habermas, helps us to understand, explain, and perhaps even resist the destruction of a once-vibrant American community.

6. The Socially Constructed Body: Insights From Feminist Theory 183

JUDITH LORBER and PATRICIA YANCEY MARTIN

Feminist theory argues that bodies are socially constructed to display masculinity or femininity, and that this gender display reflects the social roles of men and women in our society.

7. Pretty Woman, Ugly Man: Interpretivism and the Study of Prostitution 207

JULIA O'CONNELL DAVIDSON

This chapter draws on the author's own ethnographic research on prostitution to discuss the relationship between theory and research and to raise more general issues regarding the interpretivist approach.

**8. Goffman's Dramaturgical Sociology:
Personal Sales and Service in a Commodified World** 235

PETER KIVISTO and DAN PITTMAN

Building on Shakespeare's claim that "All the world is a stage," this chapter applies the insights of dramaturgical sociology to the often highly scripted world of sales and service.

**9. The "New" Means of Consumption:
A Postmodern Analysis** 261

GEORGE RITZER

Using the insights of postmodern theorists, this chapter explores the significance of consumerism in contemporary society and points to ways in which orientations toward consumption today differ from earlier times.

10. Globalization and Religious Fundamentalism 285

WILLIAM H. SWATOS, JR.

Globalization theory is applied to developments in Western religious traditions to show how developments that advance communication in late modern capitalism serves simultaneously to promote discord and division among and between people of faith.

Index 309

Classical Sociological Theory

Introduction

PETER KIVISTO

Of all the many early figures in the history of sociology, four stand out as the most enduringly important: Georg Simmel, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx. In different ways, this quartet both shaped the discipline during its formative period and continues to influence sociological thinking today. Although their respective understandings of modern society overlapped in many ways, each of these scholars nonetheless emphasized certain features of contemporary life at the expense of others. Each developed a distinctive theoretical approach that served to provide a novel way of interpreting facets of social life. The course of events since their deaths has proven time and time again that this foursome possessed remarkable insight into the nature and the dynamics of the modern age.

None of the essays in Part I pretend to capture the fullness of any of the theorists under consideration. Rather, the authors have attempted to extract from the work important elements that can be treated on their own terms but manage at the same time to reveal something of the overall thrust of the particular theorist's intellectual legacy.

The first person discussed is the German sociologist Georg Simmel (1858-1918). During his lifetime, Simmel's career was consistently stymied because of his Jewish background. German anti-Semitism was chiefly responsible for preventing him from rising to the heights of the German academic world. Nonetheless, his thought was held in high regard by his contemporaries in both Europe and America. Weber was especially impressed by his intellectual achievements. Disturbed by the injustice that befell his colleague, Weber used his considerable influence to try to advance Simmel's career. This proved in the long term to be helpful because, late in life, Simmel finally obtained a professorship that he richly deserved. Simmel had a substantial impact on what was known as the Chicago School of sociology, the most influential center for the development of sociology in the United States during the early part of the 20th century. After his death, slowly and somewhat fitfully, Simmel's reputation grew. Today, his ideas are not only seen as key to sociologists of modernity but also are embraced by theorists who describe themselves as postmodernists.

As a student of contemporary social and cultural life, Simmel's thinking frequently appeared to reflect what he described as a central trait of the modern world: its fragmentary nature. Known as a fine essayist, Simmel provided finely textured descriptions, or snapshots, of social relations and individual types. He was interested in conflict, which he saw as potentially both destructive and creative. Simmel was not a systematic social theorist, but his ideas do reflect a carefully articulated and coherent theoretical framework.

William J. Staudenmeier, Jr., an expert in alcohol studies, reveals the varied ways that Simmel's ideas can be employed to examine the role of alcohol in society. In the spirit of Simmel, Staudenmeier approaches his topic from several different perspectives, showing in the process the many ways that Simmel's ideas can be employed to shed light on various facets of it.

In Chapter 2, George Ritzer explores and updates one of the central theoretical concerns of the great German social thinker, Max Weber (1864-1920): his theory of the rationalization of modern life.

Weber was one of the most important academics responsible for the development of sociology in Germany. The scope of topics he studied was encyclopedic. Thus, he wrote about economics, politics, culture, and religion. Within these arenas, his interests were equally far-ranging. In economics, for example, he wrote about the agrarian economies of the ancient world as well as about current events, such as the emergence of a socialist economy in revolutionary Russia after World War I. In perhaps his most famous and provocative thesis, on the relationship between what he called the “Protestant ethic” and the “spirit of capitalism,” Weber argued that there was an “elective affinity” between Protestant theology and the worldview of capitalism, and this affinity served to account for the fact that capitalism arose in countries where the Protestant Reformation had proven to be successful.

No matter how controversial this thesis would subsequently prove itself to be, what is clear from his argument is that Weber thought that the various institutional spheres that make up society are interconnected. This is certainly the case in his discussion of the topic of central concern to Ritzer: rationalization. Weber thought that a rational, scientific worldview increasingly came to characterize the modern age, with its emphasis on reason. When applied to a capitalist economy, rationalization entailed, as Ritzer notes, such features as predictability, calculability, efficiency, and control. All these are employed by capitalist managers intent on increasing profitability and control over the market.

Weber was one of the great pessimists of his day, and he felt that the progressive advance of rationalization (and its subsidiary, bureaucratization) threatened our freedom. In perhaps the most widely quoted passage from his writings, he contended that our futures would come to resemble an “iron cage.” Ritzer’s article is an attempt to use this insight by analyzing what is to all of us an altogether familiar and taken-for-granted feature of our social landscape: the fast-food restaurant. The concept of McDonaldization is designed to update and specifically apply the Weberian idea of rationalization to this phenomenon. In the spirit of Weber, Ritzer seeks to explore the darker side of this pervasive phenomenon.

Regarding the third classic theorist, Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), we discover someone with a far more optimistic view of what the modern world holds in store for us. Insofar as he was a pivotal figure in the establishment of sociology in the French university system,

Durkheim was the contemporary counterpart of Weber. His ideas had a profound impact on sociology not only in France but also internationally. Indeed, it is fair to say that in the long run, Durkheim's ideas played a larger role in shaping American sociology than did the ideas of the three other people discussed in Part I.

Durkheim was concerned with understanding differing forms of human community and the distinctive bases of solidarity that undergirded them. In rather sweeping fashion, he sought to illustrate how preindustrial, premodern communities were, in significant ways, different from industrial, modern ones. He described earlier societies as being based on mechanical solidarity, whereas contemporary society was predicated on organic solidarity. Central to Durkheim in his attempt to distinguish mechanical from organic societies is the division of labor. In earlier societies, this division was rather minimal because people—or kin units—performed a wide array of tasks necessary to sustain their lives. In stark contrast, in modern industrial society, the division of labor is highly developed. The size and complexity of such societies necessitates the specialization of work. Because people are unable to perform all the tasks associated with sustaining their lives, they are highly dependent on others. Modern society fosters interdependency.

Reviewing these ideas and building on them, Anne M. Hornsby examines the novel phenomenon of “Net communities.” She is interested in seeing to what extent these cyberspace communities are merely extensions of modern organic communities or can be seen—because of the lack of physical proximity and the disembodied character of Net social interactions—as a new form of community. In other words, she questions whether Durkheim's ideas can adequately grasp the world of the Net or whether we need to build on, but go beyond, his original contributions to social theory.

Chapter 4, by John P. Walsh and Anne Zacharias-Walsh, explores the contemporary relevance of a person who historically preceded the three previously mentioned scholars: Karl Marx (1818-1883). Unlike the others, Marx never held an academic appointment but instead lived his life as a revolutionary outsider. His ideas—or at least particular interpretations of his ideas—have had a profound impact on the history of the 20th century from the success of the Russian Revolution to the collapse of communism in the late 1980s.

Marx, in a unique synthesis of German philosophy, French political ideas, and British economics, sought to understand the dynamics of

capitalism. The major sociological question he sought to answer was, how does capitalism work? In addressing this question, Marx also addressed three corollaries: (a) Is capitalism an economic system that necessarily exploits some classes in the interests of another class?; (b) if it is exploitative, is a nonexploitative industrial system possible?; and (c) if a nonexploitative system is possible, how can it come about?

Marx thought that capitalism, being driven by the quest for profits, necessarily placed that quest above the quest for a just, humane, and equitable society. His writings are an attempt not only to claim that capitalism inevitably exploits the working class but also to show why and how this is so. These questions were the ones that most preoccupied him. Marx wrote far less about the alternatives, in part because he had a decided aversion to utopian dreamers. Thus, although Marx thought that a nonexploitative system—which he called socialism or communism—was possible, he had far less to say about what this type of economy would look like and how it would be established than he did about the character of existing capitalism.

What the chapter by Walsh and Zacharias-Walsh illustrates is that today, during a major transformation in the economy, key elements from the core of Marx's analysis of the dynamics of capitalism are as relevant as they were in the 19th century.

Together, these four chapters reveal the ongoing relevance to us, as we approach the 21st century, of ideas first formulated during the 19th century and early part of this century. It is for this reason that sociologists continually return to the ideas of their forebears. They do so not simply to understand something about the history of the discipline but also because these ideas still have much to say to us about contemporary society.

Alcohol-Related Windows on Simmel's Social World

WILLIAM J. STAUDENMEIER, JR.

William J. Staudenmeier, Jr. was educated in engineering at West Point, graduating in 1972. Professor Staudenmeier worked in Air Force Social Actions, which emerged from his concern with racial injustice and his volunteer work with heroin addicts while at West Point. Helping to pioneer workplace treatment programs for military addicts and alcoholics, he was also involved with equal opportunity and treatment, race relations education, and promoting cross-cultural understanding at overseas bases. He received a PhD from Washington University in St. Louis, and he has taught at Drake University and now teaches as professor of sociology at Eureka College, where he has been awarded the college's highest teaching honor. Also recognized for his scholarly work on the social response to alcohol and other drugs, he was a visiting fellow at Cornell University and a visiting scientist at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland.

■ The German sociologist and philosopher Georg Simmel (1858-1918) was born in Berlin, lost his father while young, and became financially independent from the inheritance of his guardian's estate. After graduating from the University of Berlin with a doctorate degree, Simmel became a private lecturer at that university and was compensated only by student fees between 1885 and 1900. He remained uncompensated by the university for