



EDITION

3

SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY IN THE CLASSICAL ERA

TEXT AND READINGS

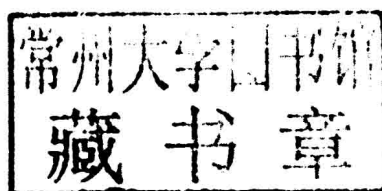
LAURA DESFOR EDLES | SCOTT APPELROUTH



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TEXT AND READINGS

EDITION 3



LAURA DESFOR EDLES | SCOTT APPELROUTH

California State University, Northridge



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SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY IN THE CLASSICAL ERA

EDITION 3



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PREFACE

Every semester, we begin our sociological theory courses by telling students that we love sociological theory, and that one of our goals is to get each and every one of them to love theory too. This challenge we set for ourselves makes teaching sociological theory exciting. If you teach “sexy” topics like the sociology of drugs, crime, or sex, students come into class expecting to be titillated. By contrast, when you teach sociological theory, students tend to come into class expecting the course to be abstract, dry, and absolutely irrelevant to their lives. The fun in teaching sociological theory is in proving students wrong. The thrill in teaching sociological theory is in helping students to see that sociological theory is absolutely central to their everyday lives—and *fascinating* as well. What a reward it is to have students who adamantly insisted that they “hated” theory at the beginning of the semester be “converted” into theorists by the end!

In teaching sociological theory, we use original texts. We rely on original texts in part because every time we read these works we derive new meaning from them. Core sociological works tend to become “core” precisely for this reason. However, using original readings requires that the professor spend lots of time and energy explaining issues and material that is unexplained or taken for granted by the theorist. This book was born of this process—teaching from original works and explaining them to our students. Hence, this book includes the original readings we use in our courses, as well as our interpretation and explanation of them.

Thus, this book is distinct in that it is both a reader *and* a text. It is unlike existing readers in several ways, however. First and foremost, this book is not just a collection of seemingly disconnected readings. Rather, in this book we provide an overarching theoretical framework within which to understand, compare, and contrast these selections. In our experience, this overarching theoretical framework is essential in explaining the relevance and excitement of sociological theory.

In addition, we discuss the social and intellectual milieu in which the selections were written, as well as their contemporary relevance. Thus, we connect these seemingly disparate works not only theoretically, but also via concrete applications to today’s world.

Finally, this theory book is unique in that we provide a variety of visuals and pedagogical devices—historical and contemporary photographs, and diagrams and charts illuminating core theoretical concepts and comparing specific ideas—to enhance student understanding. Our thinking is, Why should only introductory-level textbooks have visual images and pedagogical aids? Most everyone, not just the youngest audiences, enjoys—and learns from—visuals.

The third edition of this book is distinct in that it includes even more visual elements, contemporary applications, and examples. It also includes additional discussion questions as well as a glossary to assist students in familiarizing themselves with the key terms.

As is often the case in book projects, this turned out to be a much bigger and thornier project than either of us first imagined. And, in the process of writing this book, we have accrued many intellectual and social debts. First, we especially thank Jerry Westby of SAGE for helping us get this project started. It is now more than a decade ago since Jerry walked into

our offices at California State University, Northridge, and turned what had been a nebulous, long-standing idea into a concrete plan. Diana Axelsen, who oversaw the first edition of this book through its final stages of production, made several critical suggestions regarding the layout of the book that we continue to appreciate. In the production of this third edition, we are grateful to the reviewers who provided important ideas for improving the book and the members of the SAGE production team: Jeff Lasser, David Felts, Nicki Pachelli, and Pam Suwinsky, all of whom made the process of finalizing this edition extraordinarily smooth. We thank them for their conscientiousness and hard work.

We thank the following reviewers for their comments:

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Finally, we both thank our families—Amie, Alex, and Julia; and Mike, Benny, and Ellie—for supporting us while we spent so much time and energy on this project.

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1 INTRODUCTION



SOURCE: *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass*, by Lewis Carroll; illustration by John Tenniel. (1960) New York: Penguin. Used by permission.

Key Concepts

- Theory
- Order
 - Collective/individual
- Action
 - Rational/nonrational
- Enlightenment
- Counter-Enlightenment

"But I'm not a serpent, I tell you!" said Alice. "I'm a—I'm a—"

"Well! What are you?" said the Pigeon. "I can see you're trying to invent something!"

"I—I'm a little girl," said Alice, rather doubtfully, as she remembered the number of changes she had gone through that day.

"A likely story indeed!" said the Pigeon, in a tone of the deepest contempt. "I've seen a good many little girls in my time, but never one with such a neck as that! No, no! You're a serpent; and there's no use denying it. I suppose you'll be telling me next that you never tasted an egg!"

"I have tasted eggs, certainly," said Alice, who was a very truthful child; "but little girls eat eggs quite as much as serpents do, you know."

"I don't believe it," said the Pigeon; "but if they do, why, then they're a kind of serpent: that's all I can say."

—Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865/1960:54)

In the passage above, the Pigeon had a theory: Alice is a serpent because she has a long neck and eats eggs. Alice, however, had a different theory: she was a little girl. It was not the "facts" that were disputed in the above passage, however. Alice freely admitted she had a long neck and ate eggs. So why did Alice and the Pigeon come to such different conclusions? Why didn't the facts "speak for themselves"?

Alice and the Pigeon both *interpreted* the question (What *is* Alice?) using the categories, concepts, and assumptions with which each was familiar. It was these unarticulated concepts, assumptions, and categories that led the Pigeon and Alice to have such different conclusions.

Likewise, social life can be perplexing and complex. It is hard enough to know "the facts," let alone to know *why* things are as they seem. In this regard, theory is vital to making sense of social life because it holds assorted observations and facts together (as it did for Alice and the Pigeon). Facts make sense only because we interpret them using preexisting categories and assumptions, that is, "theories." The point is that even so-called facts are based on implicit assumptions and unacknowledged presuppositions. Whether or not we are consciously aware of them, our everyday life is filled with theories as we seek to understand the world around us. The importance of formal sociological theorizing is that it makes assumptions and categories explicit, hence makes them open to examination, scrutiny, and reformulation.

To be sure, some students find classical sociological theory as befuddling as Alice found her conversation with the Pigeon. Some students find it difficult to understand and interpret what classical theorists are saying. Indeed, some students wonder why they have to read works written more than a century ago, or why they have to study sociological theory at all. After all, they maintain, classical sociological theory is abstract and dry and has "nothing to do with my life." So why not just study contemporary theory (or, better yet, just examine empirical "reality"), and leave the old, classical theories behind?

In this book, we seek to demonstrate the continuing relevance of classical sociological theory. We argue that the theorists whose work you will read in this book are vital: first, because they helped chart the course of the discipline of sociology from its inception until the present time, and second, because their concepts and theories still permeate contemporary concerns. Sociologists still seek to explain such critical issues as the nature of capitalism, the basis of social solidarity or cohesion, the role of authority in social life, the benefits and dangers posed by modern bureaucracies, the dynamics of gender and racial oppression, and the nature of the "self," to name but a few. Classical sociological theory provides a pivotal conceptual base with which to explore today's world. To be sure, this world is more complex than it was a century ago, or for that matter, than it has been throughout most of human history, during which time individuals lived in small bands as hunter-gatherers. With agricultural and later industrial advances, however, societies grew increasingly complex.

The growing complexity, in turn, led to questions about what is distinctively “modern” about contemporary life. Sociology was born as a way of thinking about just such questions; today, we face similar questions about the “postmodern” world. The concepts and ideas introduced by classical theorists enable us to ponder the causes and consequences of the incredible rate and breadth of change.

The purpose of this book is to provide students not only with core classical sociological readings, but also with a framework for comprehending them. In this introductory chapter, we discuss (1) *what* sociological theory is, (2) *why* it is important for students to read the original works of the “core” figures in sociology, (3) *who* these “core” theorists are, and (4) *how* students can develop a more critical and gratifying understanding of some of the most important ideas advanced by these theorists. To this end, we introduce a metatheoretical framework that enables students to navigate, compare, and contrast the theorists’ central ideas as well as to contemplate *any* social issue within our own increasingly complex world.

■■ WHAT IS SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY?

Theory is a system of generalized statements or propositions about phenomena. There are two additional features, however, that together distinguish scientific theories from other idea systems such as those found in religion or philosophy. Scientific theories

1. explain and predict the phenomena in question, and
2. produce testable and thus falsifiable hypotheses.

Universal laws are intended to explain and predict events occurring in the natural or physical world. For instance, Isaac Newton established three laws of motion. The first law, the law of inertia, states that objects in motion will remain in motion and objects at rest will remain at rest, unless acted on by another force. In its explanation and predictions regarding the movement of objects, this law extends beyond the boundaries of time and space. For their part, sociologists seek to develop or refine general statements about some aspect of *social* life. For example, a long-standing (although not uncontested) sociological theory predicts that as a society becomes more modern, the salience of religion will decline. Similar to Newton’s law of inertia, the secularization theory, as it is called, is not restricted in its scope to any one time period or population. Instead, it is an abstract proposition that can be tested in any society once the key concepts making up the theory—“modern” and “religion”—are defined, and once observable measures are specified.

Thus, sociological theories share certain characteristics with theories developed in other branches of science. However, there are significant differences between social and other scientific theories (i.e., theories in the social sciences as opposed to the natural sciences) as well. First, sociological theories tend to be more evaluative and critical than theories in the natural sciences. Sociological theories are often rooted in implicit moral assumptions that contrast with traditional notions of scientific objectivity. In other words, it is often supposed that the pursuit of scientific knowledge should be free from value judgments or moral assessments, that the first and foremost concern of science is to uncover what *is*, not what *ought* to be. Indeed, such objectivity is often cast as a defining feature of science, one that separates it from other forms of knowledge based on tradition, religion, or philosophy. But sociologists tend to be interested not only in understanding the workings of society, but also in realizing a more just or equitable social order. As you will see, the work of the core classical theorists is shaped in important respects by their own moral sensibilities regarding the condition of modern societies and what the future may bring. Thus, sociological theorizing at times

falls short of the “ideal” science practiced more closely (though still imperfectly) by “hard” sciences like physics, biology, or chemistry. For some observers, this failure to conform consistently to the ideals of either science or philosophy is a primary reason for the discipline’s troublesome identity crisis and “ugly duckling” status within the academic world. For others, it represents the opportunity to develop a unique understanding of social life.

A second difference between sociological theories and those found in other scientific disciplines stems from the nature of their respective subjects. Societies are always in the process of change, while the changes themselves can be spurred by any number of causes including internal conflicts, wars with other countries, scientific or technological advances, or through the expansion of economic markets that in turn spread foreign cultures and goods. As a result, it is more difficult to fashion universal laws to explain societal dynamics. Moreover, we must also bear in mind that humans, unlike other animals or naturally occurring elements in the physical world, are motivated to act by a complex array of social and psychological forces. Our behaviors are not the product of any one principle; instead, they can be driven by self-interest, altruism, loyalty, passion, tradition, or habit, to name but a few factors. From these remarks, you can see the difficulties inherent in developing universal laws of societal development and individual behavior, despite our earlier example of the secularization theory as well as other efforts to forge such laws.

These two aspects of sociological theory (the significance of moral assumptions and the nature of the subject matter) are responsible, in part, for the form in which much sociological theory is written. Although some theorists construct formal propositions or laws to explain and predict social events and individual actions, more often theories are developed through storylike narratives. Thus, few of the original readings included in this volume contain explicitly stated propositions. One of the intellectual challenges you will face in studying the selections is to uncover the general propositions embedded in the texts. Regardless of the style in which they are presented, however, the theories (or narratives) you will explore in this text answer the most central social questions, while revealing taken-for-granted truths and encouraging you to examine who you are and where we, as a society, are headed.

■ ■ WHY READ ORIGINAL WORKS?

Some professors agree with students that original works are just too hard to decipher. These professors use secondary textbooks that interpret and simplify the ideas of core theorists. Their argument is that you simply cannot capture students’ attention using original works; students must be engaged in order to understand, and secondary texts ultimately lead to a better grasp of the covered theories.

However, there is a significant problem with reading only interpretations of original works: The secondary and original texts are not the same. Secondary texts do not simply translate what the theorist wrote into simpler terms; rather, in order to simplify, they must revise what an author has said.

The problems that can arise from even the most faithfully produced interpretations can be illustrated by the “telephone game.” Recall that childhood game where you and your friends sit in a circle. One person thinks of a message and whispers it to the next person, who passes the message on to the next person, until the last person in the circle announces the message aloud. Usually, everyone roars with laughter because the message at the end typically is nothing like the one circulated at the beginning. This is because the message inadvertently is misinterpreted and changed as it goes around.

In the telephone game, the goal is to repeat exactly what has been said to you. Yet, misinterpretations and modifications are commonplace. Consider now a secondary text in

which the goal is not to restate exactly what originally was written, but to take the original source and make it “easier” to understand. Although this process of simplification perhaps allows you to understand the secondary text, you are at least one step removed from what the original author wrote.¹ At the same time, you have no way of actually knowing what was written in the original work. Moreover, when you start thinking and writing about the material presented in the secondary reading, you are not one, but *two* steps removed from the original text. If the purpose of a course in classical sociological theory is to grapple with the ideas that preoccupied the core figures of the field—the ideas and analyses that would come to shape the direction of sociology for more than a century—then studying original works must be a cornerstone of the course.

To this end, we provide excerpts from the original writings of those we consider to be sociology’s core classical theorists. If students are to understand Karl Marx’s writings, they must read *Marx*, and not a simplified interpretation of his ideas. They must learn to study for themselves what the initiators of sociology have said about some of the most fundamental social issues, the relevance of which is timeless.

Yet, we also provide in this book a secondary interpretation of the theorists’ overall frameworks and the selected readings. Our intent is to provide a guide (albeit simplified) for understanding the original works. The secondary interpretation will help you navigate the different writing styles often resulting from the particular historical, contextual, and geographical locations in which the theorists were rooted.

WHO ARE SOCIOLOGY’S CORE THEORISTS? ■■

Our conviction that students should read the core classical sociological theorists raises an important question: Who are the core theorists? After all, the discipline of sociology has been influenced by dozens of philosophers and social thinkers. Given this fact, is it right to hold up a handful of scholars as *the* core theorists of sociology? Doesn’t this lead to the canonization of a few “dead, white, European men”?

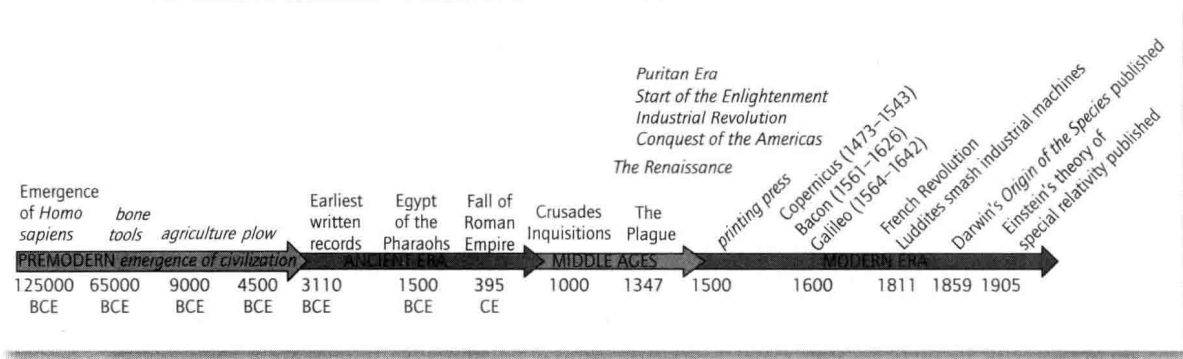
In our view, the answer is yes, it is right (or at least not wrong) to cast a select group of intellectuals as the core writers in the discipline; and yes, this is, to an extent, the canonization of a few dead, white, European men. On the other hand, it is these thinkers from whom later social theorists (who are not all dead, white, European, or male) primarily have drawn for inspiration and insight. To better understand our rationale for including some theorists while excluding others, it is important first to briefly consider the historical context that set the stage for the development of sociology as a discipline.

The Enlightenment

Many of the seeds for what would become sociology were first planted during the **Enlightenment**, a period of remarkable intellectual development that originated in Europe during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries (see Figure 1.1). The development of civil society (open spaces of debate relatively free from government control) and the quickening pace of the modern world enabled a newly emerging mass of literate citizens to think about the economic, political, and cultural conditions that shaped society. As a result,

¹Further complicating the matter is that many of the original works that make up the core of sociological theory were written in a language other than English. Language translation is itself an imperfect exercise.

Figure 1.1 Historical Eras: A Partial Timeline



a number of long-standing ideas and beliefs about social life were turned upside down. The Enlightenment, however, was not so much a fixed set of ideas as it was a new attitude, a new method of thought. One of the most important aspects of this new attitude was an emphasis on *reason*, which demanded the questioning and reexamination of received ideas and values regarding the physical world, human nature, and their relationship to God.

Before this period, there were no institutionalized academic disciplines seeking to explain the workings of the natural and social worlds. Aside from folklore, there were only the interpretations of nature and humanity sanctioned by the Catholic Church. Based on myth and faith, such explanations of the conditions of existence took on a taken-for-granted quality that largely isolated them from criticism (Lemert 1993; Seidman 1994). Enlightenment intellectuals challenged myth- and faith-based truths by subjecting them to the dictates of reason and its close cousin, science. Scientific thought had itself only begun to emerge in the fifteenth century through the efforts of astronomers and scientists such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Bacon (see Figure 1.1). Copernicus's discovery in the early sixteenth century that the Earth orbited the sun directly contradicted the literal understanding of the Bible, which placed the Earth at the center of the universe. With his inventive improvement to the telescope, Galileo confirmed Copernicus's heliocentric view the following century. Galileo's contemporary, Sir Francis Bacon, developed an experimental, inductive approach to analyzing the natural world for which he has come to be known as the "father of the scientific method." In advocating the triumph of reasoned investigation over faith, these early scientists and the Enlightenment intellectuals who followed in their footsteps rebuked existing knowledge as fraught with prejudice and mindless tradition (Seidman 1994:20–21). Not surprisingly, such views were dangerous because they challenged the authority of religious beliefs and those charged with advancing them. Indeed, Galileo was convicted of heresy by the Catholic Church, had his work banned, and spent the last ten years of his life under house arrest for advocating a heliocentric view of the universe.

It is important to bear in mind, however, that Enlightenment thinkers did not set out to disprove the existence of God; with few exceptions, there were no admitted atheists during this period of European history. But though they did not deny that the universe was divinely created, they did deny that God and his work were inscrutable. Instead, they viewed the universe as a mechanical system composed of matter in motion that obeyed natural laws that could be uncovered by means of methodical observation and empirical research. Thus, when Newton developed his theory of gravity, a giant leap forward in the development of mathematics and physics, he was offering proof of God's existence. For Newton, only

the intelligence of a divine power could have ordered the universe so perfectly around the sun as to prevent the planets from colliding under forces of gravity (Armstrong 1994:303). Similarly, Rene Descartes was convinced that reason and mathematics could provide certainty of God whose existence could be demonstrated rationally, much like a geometric proof. Faith and reason for these individuals were not irreconcilable. The heresy committed by the Enlightenment thinkers was their attempt to solve the mystery of God's design of the natural world through the methodical, empirical discovery of eternal laws. Miracles were for the ignorant and superstitious.

Later Enlightenment thinkers, inspired by growing sophistication within the fields of physics and mathematics, would begin to advance a view of science that sought to uncover not God's imprint in the universe but, rather, the natural laws of matter that ordered the universe independent of the will of a divine Creator. Scientific inquiry was no longer tied to proving God's existence. Belief in the existence of God was becoming more a private matter of conviction and conscience that could not be subjected to rational proof, but rested instead on faith. Some of the most renowned physicists, mathematicians, and philosophers of modern Western societies, from Pascal and Spinoza to Kant, Diderot, and Hume, would come to see God as a comforting idea that could offer certainty and meaning in the world or as a way to represent the summation of the causal laws and principles that ordered the universe. God, however, was not understood as a transcendent, omniscient Being who was responsible for the design of the universe and all that happens in it. And if the existence of God could not be logically or scientifically proven, then faith in his existence mattered little in explanations of reality (Armstrong 1994:311–15, 341–43). There was no longer any room left in reason and science for God.

The rise of science and empiricism ushered in by the Enlightenment would give birth to sociology in the mid-nineteenth century. The central idea behind the emerging discipline was that society could be the subject of scientific examination in the same manner as biological organisms or the physical properties of material objects. Indeed, the French intellectual Auguste Comte (1798–1857), who coined the term “sociology” in 1839, also used the term “social physics” to refer to this new discipline and his organic conceptualization of society (see Significant Others box in chapter 3). The term “social physics” reflects the Enlightenment view that the discipline of sociology parallels other natural sciences. Comte argued that, like natural scientists, sociologists should uncover, rationally and scientifically, the laws of the social world.² For Enlighteners, the main difference between scientific knowledge and either theological explanation or mere conjecture is that scientific knowledge can be tested. Thus, for Comte, the new science of society—sociology—involved (1) the analysis of the central elements and functions of social systems, using (2) concrete historical and comparative methods in order to (3) establish testable generalizations about them (Fletcher 1966:14).³

However, it was the French theorist **Émile Durkheim** (1858–1917), discussed in chapter 3, who arguably was most instrumental in laying the groundwork for the emerging discipline of sociology. Durkheim emphasized that while the primary domain of psychology is to understand processes internal to the individual (e.g., personality or instincts), the

²Physics is often considered the most scientific and rational of all the natural sciences because it focuses on the basic elements of matter and energy and their interactions.

³Of course, the scientists of the Enlightenment were not uninfluenced by subjectivity or morality. Rather, as Seidman (1994:30–31) points out, paradoxically, the Enlighteners sacralized science, progress, and reason; they deified the creators of science such as Galileo and Newton and fervently believed that science could resolve all social problems and restore social order, which is itself a type of faith.