

# Classical Sociological Theory

George Ritzer



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George Ritzer

University of Maryland

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## CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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GEORGE RITZER is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland. His major areas of interest are sociological theory and the sociology of work. He has served as Chair of the American Sociological Association's sections on Theoretical Sociology (1989–1990) and Organizations and Occupations (1980–1981). Professor Ritzer has been Distinguished Scholar-Teacher at the University of Maryland and has been awarded a Teaching Excellence award. He has held a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship and been Scholar-in-Residence at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences.

In 1992 McGraw-Hill will publish the third editions of Professor Ritzer's basic texts in sociological theory—*Sociological Theory* and *Contemporary Sociological Theory*—that have been adopted in many countries, as well as throughout the United States and Canada, in undergraduate and graduate courses in social theory.

Dr. Ritzer's main theoretical interests lie in metatheory as well as in the theory of rationalization. In metatheory, his most recent book is *Metatheorizing in Sociology* (Lexington Books, 1991). Earlier books on this topic include *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science* (1975, 1980) and *Toward an Integrated Sociological Paradigm* (1981). He has written a number of essays on rationalization as well as the soon-to-be published *The McDonaldization of Society* (Pine Forge Press, 1993).

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# PREFACE

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**T**HIS first edition of a text in classical sociological theory has its roots in the earlier editions of my book, *Sociological Theory*, that covered both classical and contemporary theory. Many of the users of that text taught classical sociological theory and thus were able to use only about half of the chapters. They wanted a text that focused on classical theory. This book responds to that need.

The base of this book is six revised and updated chapters, as well as the Appendix, from *Sociological Theory*. This book opens with the two chapters on the history of sociological theory, includes core chapters on Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Georg Simmel, and closes with the Appendix on sociological metatheorizing as well as the metatheoretical schema used as a mode of analysis throughout the text.

Five chapters have been added to that core to produce a full-fledged analysis of classical sociological theory. Following the two introductory historical chapters are chapters devoted to the early figures in sociological theory—Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer. The text then moves on to the chapters devoted to Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. I was then confronted with the decision of whether to deal in depth with other early theorists (some notable possibilities were Pareto, Cooley, and Tocqueville), or to insert into the classical tradition more recent theorists. I opted to proceed in the latter direction and the text, therefore, closes with chapters devoted to the ideas of George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schutz, and Talcott Parsons. In my view, as time moves on, these thinkers are clearly becoming part of the classical tradition. Furthermore, their theories resemble those of the other classical theorists in terms of their scope and ambition. Finally, they are included, like the other theorists covered in this text, because of their continuing relevance to sociological theory. Thus, while this is a book about classical theory, it covers the work of thinkers whose ideas in varying ways, and to varying degrees, continue to be relevant to contemporary sociological theory.

I would like to thank several of my graduate students for their help in the preparation of this book—Pam Gindoff, Terri LeMoyne, Shanyang Zhao, and particularly Jie Yang. Ira Roberts, Editing Supervisor, on this project for McGraw-Hill, was invaluable in the final production of this book. I would

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*George Ritzer*



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# A HISTORICAL SKETCH OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY: THE EARLY YEARS

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## INTRODUCTION

### SOCIAL FORCES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

- Political Revolutions
- The Industrial Revolution and the Rise of Capitalism
- The Rise of Socialism
- Urbanization
- Religious Change
- The Growth of Science

### INTELLECTUAL FORCES AND THE RISE OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

- The Enlightenment and the Founding of Sociology in France
- The Development of German Sociology
- The Origins of British Sociology
- Key Figures in Italian Sociology
- Turn of the Century Developments in European Marxism

**T**HIS book is designed as an introduction to the work of the classical sociological theorists, and we begin with one-sentence statements that get to the essence of the theories to be covered in these pages:

- We are evolving in the direction of a world dominated by science. (*Auguste Comte*)
- The world is moving in the direction of increasing order and harmony. (*Herbert Spencer*)
- Capitalism is based on the exploitation of the workers by the capitalists. (*Karl Marx*)
- The modern world offers less moral cohesion than earlier societies. (*Emile Durkheim*)
- The modern world is an iron cage of rational systems from which there is no escape. (*Max Weber*)
- The city spawns a particular type of person. (*Georg Simmel*)
- People's minds and their conceptions of themselves are shaped by their social experiences. (*George Herbert Mead*)



- In their social relationships, people often rely on tried and true “recipes” for how to handle such relationships. (*Alfred Schutz*)
- Society is an integrated system of social structures and functions. (*Talcott Parsons*)

This book is devoted to helping the reader to better understand these theoretical ideas, as well as the larger theories from which they are drawn, within the context of the lifework of the nine classical theorists listed above.

## INTRODUCTION

By *classical* sociological theory we mean theories of great scope and ambition that either were created during sociology’s classical age in Europe (roughly the early 1800s through the early 1900s) or had their roots in that period and culture. The theories of Comte, Spencer, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel were produced during the classical age in France, England, and Germany. The theories of Mead, Schutz, and Parsons were largely produced later and mainly in the United States, but they had their sources in the classical age and in European intellectual traditions.

The work of these nine theorists is discussed in this book for two basic reasons. First, in all cases their work was important in its time and played a central role in the development of sociology in general and sociological theory in particular. Second, their ideas continue to be relevant to, and read by, contemporary sociologists, although this is less true of the work of Comte and Spencer (who are of more historical significance) than it is of the others.

This book does not deal with all sociological theory but rather with classical theory. However, in order to better understand the ideas of the nine classical theorists to be discussed in depth throughout this book, we begin with two chapters that offer an overview of the entire history of sociological theory.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 1 deals with the early years of sociological theory, while Chapter 2 brings that history up to the present day and to the most recent developments in sociological theory. Taken together, these two chapters offer the context within which the work of the nine classical theorists is to be understood. The two introductory chapters are animated by the belief that it is important to understand not only the historical sources of classical theories but also their later impact. More generally, the reader should have a broad sense of sociological theory before turning to a detailed discussion of the classical theorists. The remainder of the body of this book (Chapters 3 through 11) deals with the ideas of the major classical theorists mentioned above. Thus, the ideas of the major classical theorists will be discussed twice. They will be introduced very briefly in either the first or second chapter in their historical context, and they will be discussed in great depth in the chapter devoted to each of the theorists.

<sup>1</sup> There is also an elaborate metatheoretical approach and schema that inform these two chapters as well as the rest of the book. These are outlined in the Appendix.