

**THE
GROWTH OF
SOCIOLOGICAL
THEORY**



**Human Nature,
Knowledge,
and
Social Change**

David L. Westby

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and Social Change

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THE GROWTH OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

for Doris,
at last

PREFACE

This book is predicated on the assumption that there is always a place for restudies and reinterpretations of the histories of the disciplines, perhaps especially the social science disciplines. It has long been commonplace that the past is for every present always something newly constructed and should, therefore, have something new to say to that present. I want this book to speak to our present, and I hope that the fact that the narrative concludes *circa* 1920 with the account of the seminal turn-of-the-century social theorists, will not prove to be an obstacle to this. In any case, this is as it is: time, space, and the enormous scope and complexity of the materials themselves have forced a momentary suspension of the historical account in a book perhaps already too long. I do intend that the future will see the project brought to an up-to-date conclusion.

Over the years I have come to understand more clearly the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries' influences on our discipline, influences typically given only cursory attention in histories of sociological theory. In this volume I attempt to redress this lacuna by situating and interpreting the first century (roughly 1820–1920) of sociology's development in this context. Such a project must necessarily ignore much, some mention of which should be made if only to anticipate objections.

The growing body of empirically-minded, but theoretically generally disinterested, sociological workers appearing on the scene around 1840 and thereafter will scarcely be mentioned in these pages. The best of these, such as Le Play in France, Booth in England, and Dubois in the US, are not unimportant, but they contributed little to what, with perhaps unwarranted disciplinary arrogance or narrowness, we consider theoretical advance.

Excluded also, for the most part, are the anthropologists, who professionalized their discipline a generation before sociology, and who did have some influence on important sociologists like Spencer, Durkheim and Weber. Great sociologically-inclined thinkers like Tocqueville, Freud, and Nietzsche, of course, have left their mark on sociology, and such influences will be noted, but they cannot be the central focus of a study such as this, if only because it would be impossible to do justice to the works of such mighty minds within the confines of this project. Finally, I hold to a minimum, an inexcusable minimum some will think, the treatment given a number of important sociological theorists in favor of concentrating on the more or less acknowledged masters. In this category fall Tarde and Le Bon in France, Tönnies, Simmel, Ratznhofer, Gumpłowicz, and Oppenheimer, and perhaps Husserl as well, in the German-speaking lands; Hobhouse in England, de Greef in Belgium, Westermarck in Finland, Pareto in Italy, Ward, Sumner, and Giddings in the U.S.; and the most remarkable of Russian thinkers, the anarchist Prince Kropotkin. But what I intend here is a study of how certain problematics appearing in the intellectual life of the Enlightenment have influenced the directions of sociological development, not a general survey of sociological ideas.

One reason for the length of this book has to do with what I take to be fundamental presuppositions and ideas that define the trajectory of sociological theorizing. Sociology being an empirical discipline, it follows, I think, that the empirical work of the great theorists should not be given short shrift or relegated to secondary or remote status, even in a theory book. Much of the importance of all great sociological theorists lies in the manner in which their ideas come to life in their (or in some instances, perhaps others') empirical work. The importance of the empirical dimension increases as we approach the present; the chapters on the turn-of-the-century theorists therefore come to bulge with accounts, interpretations and critiques of their theories as these relate to their empirical work. The reader is asked to bear with the author in what may in some instances be overly prolix disquisitions.

Finally, it should be said at the outset that, in focusing on the flow of ideas, this project bears the burden of the defect of treating sociology of knowledge issues only sketchily and unsystematically. This is not because these are unimportant, but simply because, once again, to attempt this would inevitably overburden the project. Ideas are not, of course, autonomous from social structure and culture, but neither are they, nor can they be, merely determined by factors defined in terms of these categories. This project is inescapably one-sided, but I view this less as a flaw than as a matter of interest and emphasis.

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During the course of writing this book various colleagues, students, and reviewers read the manuscript either in part or in its entirety. For the resulting helpful comments and criticisms I especially wish to thank Janet Newton, Ed Walsh, Charles Bolton, Frank Hearn, Mary Waters, Kevin Ross, and four anonymous reviewers. Norbert Wiley, as always, has been an inspiration to me, and three decades of association, I am quite certain, have left their mark on me and this book. Several years of continuing discussions with David Maines, Mari Molseed, and Scott Camp, I hope and think, have helped to improve the book's quality. All errors, misconceptions, dead-end arguments, and failures of nerve are, of course, my own.

I would like to express my appreciation to several editors at Prentice Hall, particularly Nancy Roberts, for their patience and perseverance through the various phases of the preparation of the manuscript. Frank Clemente and Roland Pellegrin, present and past heads of the department of sociology at Penn State, provided much needed and much appreciated resources over the course of several years. Debi Welsby, Sheri Miller, and Betsy Will bore the brunt of the typing, and I want to thank them for their tireless endurance and inner fortitude in bearing with me in what must have been experienced as a near-interminable succession of unreasonable requests and demands. To my wife Doris goes my appreciation for taking on the thankless and particularly difficult task of typing the bibliography. I am indebted to Craig Gibson for his careful and competent work preparing the name index.

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1

INTRODUCTION

The human sciences, even in their present adolescent state, stand as one of the nobler achievements in history. Yet the tentative stirrings of self-understanding that they represent, and the humane future they have always seemed to promise, have never seemed more fragile. For like all other human activities, the social processes of knowledge production are nested in, and inevitably must come to terms with, the political and economic realities of society, as well as the conditions of their own internal organization. The sources of bias are everywhere for they inhere in all experience; the struggles for power reach into all corners of social existence; and much if not most social knowledge itself possesses the potential, inherently disturbing to most, of profoundly challenging the received wisdom. The wonder is not that the human sciences have failed to transform the globe, or even to have approximated the power of their natural science brethren, but, rather, that they continue to exist at all.

This surprising array of developments—the emergence and growth of the social sciences—has always been of special interest to its practitioners and apprentices. Psychologists, economists, political scientists, anthropologists, and, perhaps above all, sociologists, have always been preoccupied with their origins, their reasons for being, their paths to the present. In this volume I shall be going over ground trodden by earlier chroniclers, but with some different footwork. Certainly, there is little justification for just another historical *account*. In the following pages I develop an interpretation of the emergence of sociology from its presociological origins up to the twentieth century from a different viewpoint, namely, that the great innovations in sociological thought have occurred because of the existence of incongruities

and tensions between concrete versions of three “problematics” to be described shortly; and further, that these problematics remained pertinent for the work of the first generation of academic sociologists around the turn of the century, and even for understanding the drift and direction of the discipline today. This is to say that the fundamental questions that exercised the thinkers who brought our discipline into being—the issues at the roots—are still with us.

The concept of “problematic” is central to the task of this work. Abrams’s definition grasps *part* of the sense intended here:

A rudimentary organization of a field of phenomena which yields problems for investigation. The organization occurs on the basis of some more or less explicitly theoretical presuppositions . . .

(Abrams, 1982, xv)

This definition borrows from Althusser (Althusser, 1971) and is intended to direct attention to the broader contexts within which the disciplines are organized. It points to the presuppositional aspects of inquiry distinct from those designated by such terms as *theory*, *paradigm*, *conceptual scheme*, and *domain assumption*.

However, for present purposes, it is necessary to modify this concept in two ways. First, I wish to give it an interpretation broader than the context of an existing or developed discipline, and to extend it to *predisciplinary* conditions. The meaning of this will be obvious in the chapters to come; here, it is necessary only to make the banal observation that although sociology did not exist in the eighteenth century, or at any rate scarcely existed, the idea of a problematic may nevertheless be fruitfully applied to the protosociological work of some of the thinkers of the period.

Second, to the principle that the problematic “yields problems for investigation”, we append the notion that it does so to one degree or another because of inconsistencies, contradictions, or antinomies that attend the “propositions” themselves, perhaps especially in the predisciplinary condition. Again, the concrete sense of this will come clear in the chapters following.

As an intellectual enterprise, sociology was powerfully conditioned by the directions taken in the intellectual work of thinkers working within three problematics, all emerging from the advancing scientific revolution of the preceding two centuries. These were specifically: (1) the revolutionary idea of progress as a *natural* organizing principle of the human condition, set against theological and static doctrines; (2) the idea of a fixed human nature challenged by notions centering on its malleability, and (3) the astonishing notion, again opposed to received doctrine, that human action could be understood scientifically, and that this understanding could be the basis for an emancipatory practice.

The problematics of human nature, social change, and the possibilities of a science of human social life in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, then, came to constitute *rudimentary* organizations of certain “fields of phenomena” yielding “problems for investigation.” The specific forms these problems came to assume derived from or were constituted out of dilemmas and antinomies in the received theologies and philosophies, aspects

of the worldviews of this and the preceding period, mainly medieval Catholicism.

Sociology took shape originally (and began to separate itself with some degree of distinctiveness from other types of social analysis) through a dramatic recasting of the assumptions about the social world contained in the medieval Christian worldview. The breakdown of that order—politically, socially, economically—was the massive condition of the appearance of the social sciences in general. It is not assumed that there was any particular *immanent* reason why specific conceptions within these emerging problematics should have been brought together as the first versions of sociology. However, the fact is that—in this interpretation—they were decisive for the development of the discipline. In this analysis, I trace the interlacing of the various concrete formulations of each and attempt to show that they have influenced the emergence of sociology as we know it.

THREE PROBLEMATICS

Social Change: The Great Transformation

Beginning in the West, sometime during the fourteenth century, the massive societal upheaval that Karl Polanyi has called “The Great Transformation” (26) now engulfs the world, and through the forces it has unleashed threatens the very survival of the race. It is, of course, not in the least surprising that this movement has been accompanied by a most varied array of attempts at comprehension and interpretation. Initially mostly religious in nature, these intellectual movements have only relatively recently assumed their secular or “naturalistic” form.

But even among secularized intellectuals, social change as a master problematic would never have been possible within the received antiquarianism that dominated intellectual life well up into the eighteenth century. Until this time intellectual culture had venerated the past and invested antiquity with an authority that precluded anything like a science of society. The decisive shift may be seen in philosophers like Descartes, who wrote that “men must cut themselves off from preconceived notions of past authority”; and Fontenelle, who in *The Dialogues of the Dead* (Fontenelle, 1949) argued that natural philosophy (meaning natural science) and mathematics were disciplines that were able to perfect themselves gradually, but must continue to do so. Descartes and Fontenelle stood with the “moderns” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries’ debate between “moderns” and “ancients?”

During the course of the eighteenth century, this attitude became quite firmly established, in progressive circles at least, and begins to appear in the thought of thinkers like Condorcet as systematized history of the advancing perfectibility of humankind. Antiquity was now seen as no more than the starting point for a series of epochs leading up to the present, a present typically understood as a transitional stage leading to a new and revolutionary future. The conception of change as progress invaded all important European intellectual cultures: Hegel and his followers in Prussia;

the philosophes and others in France; liberals of various sorts, like John Locke in England, and Tom Paine in the American colonies. The ideology of change as progress was to be decisive for the historic path of sociology. This will be the topic of Chapter 2.

Philosophical Anthropology and the Problem of Human Nature

By “philosophical anthropology” I mean a set of questions regarding the nature of “human nature” in relation to society. Philosophical, religious, and social scientific conceptual systems may all be thought of as possessing, in varying degrees of explicitness, such a framework of understanding. A philosophical anthropology provides answers to at least three questions:

1. In what sense do members of the human species possess a common “original” or presocial nature?
2. What implications does this have for social life (i.e., can the nature of social life be analyzed on the bases of such assumptions)?
3. What ethical implications (i.e., prescriptions for proper conduct or social organization) arise out of the first two considerations?

In the presociological period of the eighteenth century, several forms of more or less secularized philosophical anthropology appears in European intellectual life. These included: (1) the liberalism running from Hobbes through Locke and Mandeville, to classical political economy and the utilitarianism, up to its greatest nineteenth century sociological form, the work of Herbert Spencer, later labeled the theory of “possessive individualism” by McPherson; (2) a basically conservative view, heavily influenced by Christian theology and practice and the theory of the Fall, as represented among French conservative thinkers such as Bonald and Maistre; and (3) a “sociable” conception of man’s nature, best represented in the Scottish school of Smith, Ferguson, Hume, and others, and among deists such as Shaftesbury.

Although different in substance, the liberal and conservative views have in common the assumption that an understanding of social life (including politics and economics) requires grounding in characterizations of original nature and proceed, usually deductively (Hobbes is here the exemplar), to an analysis of social life. The “sociable” view is best thought of as an early tentative movement toward a more specifically sociological form of understanding that never quite succeeded in shaking off original nature assumptions. The “original nature *causes* social level” formula underlying so much of eighteenth century social thought has had a profound and lasting effect on the nature of our discipline.

To the foregoing it is necessary to append a disclaimer. Nothing here is to be understood as a rejection of the idea of human nature *as such*, or even its place in present or future sociology. All that is claimed is that in the earlier stages of sociology’s development the practice of employing conceptions of original nature as explanations of social phenomena was a domain assumption constituting a major obstacle to the eventual instantiation of a discipline conceived of in nonreductionist fashion. This holds indepen-