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Raymond  
Aron

*Translated by  
Richard Howard  
and  
Helen Weaver*

# Main Currents in Sociological Thought I

Montesquieu

Comte

Marx

Tocqueville

The Sociologists  
and the  
Revolution  
of 1848



Doubleday  
Anchor Book

# MAIN CURRENTS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

## VOLUME I

*Montesquieu, Comte, Marx, Tocqueville,*  
AND  
*The Sociologists and the Revolution of 1848*

BY RAYMOND ARON

Translated from the French by  
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RAYMOND ARON holds a chair in sociology at the Sorbonne and is widely known as one of Europe's ranking commentators on social, political, and economic affairs. Born in Paris in 1905, he attended the Ecole Normale Supérieure, took his Agrégation de Philosophie in 1928, and read at the University of Cologne. In 1935 he was named a professor at the Ecole Normale Saint-Cloud, and in 1939 he joined the Faculté des Lettres at Toulouse. After the French capitulation he worked with General de Gaulle in London and served as editor-in-chief of the magazine *La France Libre*. When the war ended he returned to Paris, working first as an editorial writer for *Combat* and later on the staff of *Le Figaro*. Many of his books have been published in the United States, among them *Century of Total War*; *The Opium of the Intellectuals*; *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*; *France: Steadfast and Changing*; *On War*; *The Great Debate* (Anchor A467); and *Peace and War*. He has also written many articles for American periodicals, including *Partisan Review*, *The New Republic*, and *The New York Times Magazine*.

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## Introduction

ANY HISTORICAL introduction to general sociology raises certain philosophical or methodological problems. Indeed, one cannot undertake the history of any historical entity—whether a nation or a scientific discipline—without establishing its definition, without fixing its limits. One cannot retrace the past of France until one has decided what France is. And if in this case the problem seems a simple one, substitute for the concept “France” the concept “Europe” or the concept of “the West,” and you will soon see that the definition of a historical subject is not a matter of course.

To write a history of sociology, one must arrive at a definition of what is to be called “sociology.” Now, in dealing with a natural science like mathematics or physics, the solution is relatively simple: in these cases, science presents itself in the form of a body of proven propositions; and history can, if so desired, be reduced to the gradual discovery of the truth as it appears to us today. In this case, history is no more than the discovery of currently accepted truths. But if we employed such a method in the case of sociology, the consequences would be unfortunate, for there is great danger that each sociologist would write a different history of sociology, each of such histories obligingly leading up to the current situation and the present truth, i.e., the truth held by the sociologist in question.

I cannot offer any body of demonstrated truths which might be called the present state of sociology. Strictly speaking, there is the present state of *French* sociology, illustrated in the *Traité de Sociologie* published by the



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Presses Universitaires de France. But this treatise is not necessarily regarded as the last word on the subject in the United States, where a more conceptual, more analytic notion of sociology prevails; still less in the Soviet Union, where a more categorical notion of sociological truth is preferred.

To avoid this difficulty, I prefer to regard as sociology that which societies designate as such; I regard as sociologists those who assume this title—of honor or disgrace, as you will; and for an idea of sociology throughout the world, I refer to the quadrennial International Congress of Sociology attended by several hundred people who call themselves sociologists and who discuss a certain number of problems they call sociological—problems which imply a certain idea of what sociology is and should be today.

In the course of recent international congresses, two typical schools emerged, each aware of itself and of its opposition to the other. These two concepts of sociology were that of the American school on the one hand and that of the Soviet, or Marxist, school on the other. (To be sure, there appeared intermediate schools—the Polish school or the French school—which shared a tendency to cast aspersions on the two dominant ones: in these cases the sociologists reflected quite accurately the societies they represented.) I shall try to define briefly the respective characteristics of each of these two major schools of sociology.

Marxist sociology is essentially an inclusive interpretation of modern societies and of the evolution of social types. The primary object of sociological investigation, according to our colleagues in Moscow, is the discovery of the fundamental laws of historical evolution. These laws of historical evolution afford two major aspects, one static, the other dynamic. More precisely, the Soviet sociologists establish the fundamental structure of human societies as determined by the forces and relations of production; next, they define the principal social types and trace the necessary evolution from one social type to another. These social

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types are, moreover, the same ones discovered by Marx in the preface to his *Critique of Political Economy*: the ancient economy, based on slavery; the medieval economy, based on serfdom; the capitalist economy, based on wage earning; and finally, the socialist economy, which marks the end of the exploitation of man by man and of one class by another.

Only one of Marx's social types has virtually disappeared from contemporary Soviet literature, and that is the social type Marx called "the Asiatic mode of production," which has given rise to a great body of literature, both Marxist and non-Marxist. The Asiatic mode of production, as Marx defined it, was based on the dominant and almost exclusive role of the state in the organization of production. This role of the state was in turn related to the necessity of controlling the rivers and their irrigating functions. The Asiatic mode of production was not characterized by a class struggle within the society, but by a simple opposition between the mass of the ruled and the minority of the rulers or administrators organized into a vast state bureaucracy.

A sociology of the Marxist kind is synthetic, in the sense that Auguste Comte assigned to this term: it comprehends the whole of each society; unlike the specific social sciences, it is distinguished by its all-encompassing design. It seeks to grasp society in its totality, rather than any particular aspect of society.

This synthetic sociology is at the same time a historical sociology. It is not content to analyze modern societies in terms of their structure at any given moment. It analyzes and interprets modern societies in terms of the future of the human race. It contains within itself a philosophy of history.

Synthetic and historical, Marxist sociology is also determinist; it predicts as inevitable the advent of a certain economic and social mode of organization. It is also progressive as well as determinist, because it assumes the superiority of the coming social regime, as compared with the social regimes of the past or present.



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This sociology, which claims to derive from Marx and which does retain many of his essential ideas, albeit in simplified form, contains two kinds of contradictory implications, depending on whether one is considering Soviet or non-Soviet societies.

The Marxist sociology of the nineteenth century was revolutionary. By this I mean that it predicted the revolution which would destroy the capitalist regime and hailed this revolution as a good thing. But today Soviet sociology regards the beneficial revolution as a thing of the past, not of the future. The anniversary of the 1917 revolution is celebrated: the revolution is forty-eight years old; and because the decisive break has occurred in the course of history, the same sociology which was revolutionary in the nineteenth century plays a conservative role today, at least in relation to Soviet society. A sociology born of a revolutionary intent has become an ideology which justifies the existing Soviet society.

But at the same time Soviet sociology has remained revolutionary in relation to non-Soviet societies. It implies that other types of societies have yet to undergo the revolution which Soviet society accomplished in 1917.

From this duality there derives a certain peculiarity of the sociological literature of the Soviet Union. The more Soviet sociologists know about their own society, the more they praise it; the less they know of other societies, the more they criticize them.

Indeed, until quite recently, Soviet sociologists could not leave the Soviet Union. But thanks to their theories they thought themselves familiar with non-Soviet society, they denounced its decadence, and they predicted its inevitable collapse. Meanwhile, dedicated in theory to the study of Soviet society, they were embarrassed in fact because they knew in advance what this postrevolutionary society was like, because they knew, at least in broad outline, what it had to be according to the laws of history.

What this comes down to is that in a postrevolutionary society, the formerly revolutionary ideology has become of-

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ficial; it has become the expression of the truth of the state. This clearly helps give Soviet sociologists that sense of their own importance which is lacking in Western societies. But equally clearly, a position as society's official interpreter entails certain restrictions in the search for truth.

American sociology reveals, in general, exactly opposite characteristics. American sociologists, in my own experience, never talk about laws of history, first of all because they are not acquainted with them, and next because they do not believe in their existence. Because they are men of intelligence, they would prefer to say that these laws have not been established with any certainty; but if they were to express their real thoughts, they would probably say that what the Soviets regard as laws of history have no scientific validity and that there is no justification for deriving such laws either from recurrent patterns through the ages or from evolutionary tendencies sufficiently obvious to permit the accurate prediction of the future from the present.

American sociology is fundamentally analytical and empirical; it proposes to examine the way of life of individuals in the societies with which we are familiar. Its energetic research is aimed at determining the thoughts and reactions of students in a classroom, professors in or outside their universities, workers in a factory, voters on election day, and so forth. American sociology prefers to explain institutions and structures in terms of the behavior of individuals and of the goals, mental states, and motives which determine the behavior of members of the various social groups.

This empirical or analytical sociology is not a state ideology, nor is it a conscious glorification of American society. As a matter of fact, it is carried on for the most part by persons belonging to what is known in the United States as the liberal school of political opinion. By and large, American liberals are more apt to vote for the Democratic than the Republican Party (although there are liberals in the Republican Party, too). On most of the political issues raised in the United States, they favor the

solutions advocated by the European left. For example, they prefer a maximum of social mobility to the hereditary perpetuation of class distinctions.

American sociologists are more sympathetic than hostile to American society, but their sympathy takes the form of approval of the whole and criticism of the parts—which is as good a definition as any of what in Europe is called “reformism.”

Soviet sociologists are conservative for themselves and revolutionaries for others. American sociologists are inclined to be reformists for the whole world. They are reformists more specifically for American society, because they are primarily concerned with American society. But their method and their point of view, transported to other societies, would probably lead to the assumption of analogous positions. Not that the analytical or empirical method of study necessarily excludes the revolutionary spirit: this method may in some cases encounter obstacles which cannot be surmounted by mere reforms. But, in most cases, the adoption of American sociological method and attitude will lead to the adoption of reformist positions. If you study social organizations in detail, you will find something to improve everywhere. In order to seek a revolution—that is, a total upheaval—you must assume an over-all viewpoint, take up a synthetic method, define the essence of a given society, and reject that essence.

These two schools, which I have characterized so sketchily, do not include the whole of what is practiced all over the world under the name of sociology. But these two schools, which are the most typical ones, form the opposite poles between which fluctuates what is called sociology today. All national schools include these two approaches in varying degrees—the tendency toward the empirical and analytical study of modern society and the tendency toward synthetic analysis of modern societies in the context of world history. Whether the sociology be analytic or synthetic, contemporary or historical, it contains implications regarding the society in question. It is impossible for a



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study of a given society, however scientific its aims, not to contain implied approval or criticism of that society.

The social role of sociology in the two schools I have described is perfectly clear. The role of Soviet sociology is conservative-revolutionary; that of American sociology is conservative-reformist. But, in both cases, these schools regard their revolution as lying in the past rather than the future.

As for the sociologies which are neither Soviet nor American, perhaps most of their uncertainty results from the difficulty they have in situating their revolution precisely. When one knows that the revolution is either ahead or behind, one has a clear historical perspective. The European sociologies, to the extent that they are being Americanized, are in the process of destroying the idea of Revolution with a capital "R." The sociologies, like the societies, of Western Europe are approaching the American model. German sociology increasingly resembles American analytical and empirical sociology. French sociology is also beginning to approach the American model, with the same psychological repercussions. I have observed the gradual renunciation of the revolutionary ideology in young sociologists as they became researchers. They remain leftists; but when one undertakes a concrete, detailed study of social institutions, one becomes critical in detail and forgets about total negation.

Whatever the diversity of these two schools and of all the intermediary ones, they nevertheless belong to a whole which may be called sociology. Indeed, these two schools converge in the study of common problems. In both schools, social differentiation within modern societies is studied under various aspects, designated by such terms as social stratification, class struggle, and social mobility.

Still more generally, both schools hold that one essential characteristic of modern society is the rapid transformation of the society itself. Modern societies are perhaps the first in history, not just to change, but also to be aware of change as the very nature of society. While in most past

societies the ideal image was of an established and unchanging order, the ideal image of modern societies is of a steady economic growth involving constant upheavals in the social organization.

Now, this phenomenon is common to Soviet and Western societies. Clearly it is one of the preferential domains of all sociological inquiry which permits us to say that sociology has retained as a preferential domain the problem of *modern* societies, as was predicted by those who were the first theorists of sociology and whom we shall be studying in the chapters that follow.

In addition, however, to this problem of modern society, sociologists do concern themselves, on the one hand, with the groups I shall call traditional—groups which have existed in all societies as well as the modern ones: the family and the state—and, on the other hand, with the relatively new groups arising within modern society: political parties, labor unions, pressure groups, and so on.

One can say, then, that whatever the method used or the viewpoint taken, sociology has as its object the analysis, understanding, and interpretation of modern societies in the framework of the permanent organization of historical societies.

Besides having this central object, sociology is oriented in two other directions. On the one hand, there are countless specialized sociologies; and, on the other, there is the attempt to comprehend units larger than the nation itself.

The specialized sociologies—the sociology of science, the sociology of language, the sociology of art, the sociology of literature—are attempts to explain the evolution of human phenomena in relation to the social milieu. I deliberately use the phrase “in relation to,” for it has a double significance, referring either to the social causes or influences which favored, opposed, or modified these intellectual creations, or to the social consequences of these intellectual creations. These so-called specialized sociologies are a specific approach to the study and interpretation of realities

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which have a social aspect, without their essence being exhausted by their social character.

Finally, there is the effort of sociological inquiry to determine and comprehend those vast and vague realities called "civilizations" or "cultures."

These realities are not constituted by an organization, in the manner of national entities. Whether we grant or deny the reality of a "Western Civilization," there has never been an organization which established and represented the unity of that civilization. Yet the latter has nonetheless had a certain existence. The cultures Spengler or Toynbee speak of are perhaps difficult to comprehend; but they are not pure mythology.

What conclusions may be drawn from this preliminary examination into the nature of sociology? Here are a few which will serve as our point of departure.

Sociology may be said to be characterized by two specific aims which account for its nature. On the one hand, sociology lays claim to objective and scientific knowledge. On the other, what it claims to know objectively and scientifically is some vaguely defined thing we call society or societies or social phenomena. For the time being, I shall use these expressions as if they were synonymous.

In the past, there have always been studies devoted to the organization of societies. But the traditional studies of the social order were not inspired to the same extent by the two aims I have just discussed—the aim of scientific objectivity and the aim of grasping the social *as such*.

Aristotle's *Politics* is a treatise on political sociology. But the central interest, the point of reference in Aristotle's *Politics*, is the political regime and not the social organization. Thus, to my way of thinking, sociology marks a moment in man's reflection on historical reality, the moment when the concept of the social, of society, becomes the center of interest, replacing the concept of politics or of the regime or of the state.



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But these two concepts, the scientific and the social, immediately give rise to two antithetical interpretations which correspond quite neatly to the characteristics of the two major schools. For the specifically social may be sought either on the level of the part, the element, or on the level of the whole, the entity. Sociology, the science of the social, may just as well be the science of the microscopic relationships between two people on the street or three dozen people in a military or academic group, as the science of society as a whole.

This fluctuation between element and entity has an analogy in the opposition between the present and the past. Of course, these two antitheses are not equivalent. One may elaborate a sociology that is both analytical and historical. There is no necessary connection between the tendency toward the modern and the tendency toward the microscopic. But, in fact, there is a certain relation all the same. For a sociology which tends toward the interpretation of society as a whole is almost irresistibly led to define social types; and the definition of social types leads to the hypothesis of an evolution from one social type to another.

If one defines the aim proper to sociology as the combination and reunion of the study of the part with the study of the whole, it is easier to explain the significant role played by problems of delimitation in sociological theory, especially in general sociology. In itself, it is not particularly interesting to know how sociology differs from history or from psychology or from economics. But if sociology's specific intention is to analyze and to comprehend the social as such, both as element and as entity, then countless questions inevitably arise concerning the relations between sociology as such and the other social disciplines. This is why we shall, in what follows, ask every sociologist to give his interpretation of the relations between sociology and the other social disciplines. The problem of delimitation is not a vain theoretical diversion; it is the expression of the central problem of sociology as an original science

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—sociology whose aim is to comprehend the social as such, by which is meant either the element present in all social relations or the larger and vaguer entity embracing and uniting the various sectors of collective life.

