

STEVEN SEIDMAN



CONTESTED KNOWLEDGE

SOCIAL THEORY TODAY

FIFTH EDITION

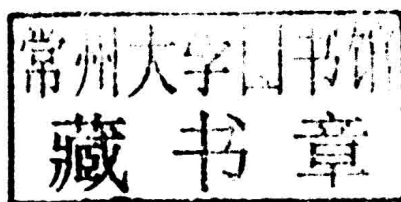
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Preface

I am very much a child of the sixties. I dropped out of college, looked to my body as a source of pleasure and rebellion, and marched to change the world. I imagined the social sphere as a field of enormous possibilities for self- and collective renewal. As the sixties dead-ended in drugs, violence, and either political extremism or liberal accommodation, I followed the hordes of the middle class into graduate school. I looked to sociology as a discipline that would help make sense of my individual and collective world while also contributing to envisioning a different and better future.

I recall the disillusionment of my first few years as a sociologist. I expected my colleagues to share my moral vision of sociology. The reality was sobering. My colleagues, whom I admired for their research skills and their accomplishments, hardly read outside of their specialty areas; few of them deliberately linked their scholarship to public debates and controversies; much of the culture of sociology in the 1980s and 1990s seemed parochial – a world where “scientific” talk and status anxieties produced an insulated expert culture. I was distraught at the wreckage of professionalization: smart, well-intentioned individuals with good values, whose intellect was disciplined by a culture that often ignored history, non-American and non-“Western” cultures, and that lacked strong ties to a public world of moral and political debate.

I rebelled. I turned to the roots of modern social thought in order to call sociology to task for abandoning its moral promise. In the 1980s, I undertook a study of the Enlightenment origins of European social theory. The passion that previously went into personal and social rebellion was now channeled into a quest to reform sociology. I hoped to find in the original inspiration of modern social theory a warrant for approaching sociology as having a moral and political purpose. I found what I was looking for: the *philosophes* and the classics viewed social analysis as a vehicle of social critique and change.

As the memories of the 1960s faded, my own writings became obscure. In the apolitical spirit of America in the 1980s, I was absorbing the disciplinary culture of sociology. I started thinking of myself as a “theorist,” as if theory had its own problems and value apart from social analysis and critique. I was losing myself in “theory” discussions. My work was starting to feel sterile and pointless. I felt alienated from my original moral and political motives for becoming a sociologist.

The AIDS crisis jolted me. It was 1981. I remember reading of the mysterious disease that was taking the lives of gay men. I recall the media hysteria, the homophobic public response, and the governmental neglect. I was living in New Mexico trying to finish a book on the classical social theorists. As I was preoccupied with Marx's *Capital* or Durkheim's *Suicide*, the fatalities from AIDS seemed to be growing exponentially. The AIDS epidemic fed into a backlash against the social rebellions of the 1960s. America, once again, seemed in the throes of a major political and cultural war. As a leftist and gay man, my life felt raw and vulnerable. The progressive culture that I valued was under attack. AIDS was an enemy killing off my friends and threatening me personally. In the midst of this social and personal upheaval, my work on classical sociology felt more and more pointless, as did the field of sociology in general.

In a manner of speaking, I took leave of sociology in the early 1980s. I finished the book on classical social theory. But my focus had definitely shifted. AIDS and the backlash against the progressive movements of the 1960s gripped me. I began clipping out everything that appeared in the press on AIDS and the social backlash. I stopped reading sociology and sociological theory. As the politics of the body, sexuality, gender, and knowledge moved to the center of my life, I found myself absorbed in the texts of feminism, gay and lesbian studies, race theory, poststructuralism, and cultural studies. In the course of reading and writing in these areas, I had for all practical purposes ceased being part of the sociological community.

And yet, I have returned to sociology. I write this book, in part, as a sociologist. Why?

Perhaps I was drawn back to the discipline the way a young adult, having achieved a certain independence and individuality, returns to his or her original family with a newfound sense of belonging. Sociology was the community that originally nourished me and provided me with new ways of thinking about myself and the social world. I have learned that, as much as I resist sociology, I am ever drawn to it. I have realized that this discipline is a home of sorts for me. I like to think of sociology as a sort of extended family or, better yet, a church. We quarrel with passion and sometimes fury, because many of our deepest beliefs and values are attached to our social ideas and because we care dearly about each other, if not always in an intimate way, then as individuals who share a similar disciplinary history and culture.

I have returned to sociology, but I am not quite the same person that I was before my "travels." Like anyone who spends considerable time in an alien culture, I have come to see my native land as just one among many cultures. I have relativized the premises, concepts, and knowledges of sociology. In particular, I have come to see the theory debates among postwar sociologists as simply one tradition of debate about "the social world." Sociological theorists have wrongly imagined that their central problems, for example, the logic of social action and order, the dispute over the validity of conflict versus order paradigms, or the question of the relation between the micro and macro levels of analysis, pertain to the very nature of "the social." The presumption is that if anyone, at any time, were to think seriously about the social world he or she would end up centering reflection on these issues. This is, as anthropologists would say, an example of ethnocentrism, a practice that claims universality and validity for the particular values and ideas of one group. For example, postwar Western feminists have not defined these

theory problems as central. Instead, feminist debate has revolved around questions of the natural and social aspects of gender, the concept of gender as a master category of social explanation, the origins of male dominance, the relation between the private and public realm, the nature of identity and difference, and the multiple character of domination and resistance.

Relativizing sociological theory does not mean denying its importance. There is much in sociological theory that is valuable and worth defending; in particular its social understanding of the self, its rich conceptual language for understanding institutions and whole societies, its accounts of social development, order, and crisis, and its tradition of cultural social studies. And yet, sociological theory has all too often, especially in the last few decades, become isolated from public life and has chased the idol of science to a point of its own obscurity. Much sociological theory has abandoned a moral and political intention to engage the world as a medium of critical analysis and change.

I return to sociology as I initially came to the discipline, with the hope of finding a home where social analysis is valued because it is inspired by a will to make a better world. This does not mean giving up empirical analysis; nor does it mean abandoning analytical perspectives. However, I do believe that the purpose of sociology is not to accumulate knowledge, establish a science of society, or build a system of sociology, but to be part of the ongoing conversation and conflict over the present and future shape of the social world. The hope that has guided sociology and modern social theory for some 200 years is that knowledge can make a difference in our lives and that its chief value lies in the kinds of lives it imagines and helps to create. This hope is what inspired this volume.

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	x
Introduction	1
Part I The Rise of the Classical Tradition	7
Introduction to Part I	9
1 The Idea of a Science of Society: The Enlightenment and Auguste Comte	11
2 The Revolutionary Theory of Karl Marx	22
3 The Promise of Sociology: Emile Durkheim	36
4 The Ironic Social Theory of Max Weber	48
Afterword to Part I	61
Part II Rethinking the Classical Tradition: American Sociology	65
Introduction to Part II	67
5 The Grand Theory of Talcott Parsons, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann	70
6 The Scientific Theory of Randall Collins and Peter Blau	86
7 The Moral Sociology of C. Wright Mills and Robert Bellah	97
Afterword to Part II	113
Part III Rethinking the Classical Tradition: European Theory	115
Introduction to Part III	117
8 The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas	119

9	Stuart Hall and British Cultural Studies	132
10	The Critical Sociology of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu	140
	Afterword to Part III	152
Part IV Revisions and Revolts: The Postmodern Turn		155
	Introduction to Part IV	157
11	The Postmodern World of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard	159
12	Michel Foucault's Disciplinary Society	175
13	Zygmunt Bauman's Sociology of Postmodernity	188
	Afterword to Part IV	197
Part V Revisions and Revolts: Identity Politics and Theory		201
	Introduction to Part V	203
14	Feminist Theory/Masculinity Studies	205
15	Critical Race Theory/White Studies	226
16	Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Theory/Heterosexual Studies	239
17	Colonial Discourse Studies	254
	Afterword to Part V	263
Part VI Revisions and Revolts: Theories of World Order		267
	Introduction to Part VI	269
18	From Nation to Globe: David Held and Mary Kaldor	271
19	Global Capitalism: Immanuel Wallerstein and Manuel Castells	281
20	The Return of Empire? Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, David Harvey and Michael Mann	290
	Afterword to Part VI	300
Part VII The Rise of Postdisciplinary Theory		303
	Introduction to Part VII	305
21	Theories of "the Other"	307
22	Intimate Life in the "West"	318
23	Nationalism and the Crisis of Postcolonial Nations	330
	Afterword to Part VII	342
	<i>Index</i>	345

Introduction

Modern social theory has been inspired by a noble purpose: to advance human freedom. By conceiving of the human condition as fundamentally social and historical, the social sciences anticipated the possibility that societies could rationally fashion their own destiny. If social customs and institutions are understood as products of human actions, not natural or divine law, couldn't they be shaped to benefit all of humanity?

The social scientist was imagined as a public educator whose chief task was public enlightenment. In their quest for truth, social scientists would illuminate the social dangers to freedom and the prospects for progress. The pioneers of the social sciences, thinkers such as Montesquieu, Condorcet, Marx, Comte, Weber, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and W. E. B. Du Bois, invented new and imaginative ways of understanding the origin and organization of the social world. Their ideas addressed matters of considerable moral and political significance, for example, the origins of inequality, the bureaucratic threat to freedom, the state of the Negro in society, and the exploitation of women. For the founding figures of the social sciences, knowledge was valued as a means of promoting social progress.

Contemporary sociological theory has not abandoned this social purpose. Sociologists continue to provide critical perspectives on the present that aim to enlighten a broad public. Yet sociological theory and, to a lesser extent, sociology in general, have become more and more isolated from public life, to the detriment of both sociology and public life. As sociological theorists have retreated from their role as public educators, their ideas have lost social relevance. Moreover, the general public suffers from theorists' diminishing social authority. Sociological theory has been a catalyst of public debate and an important provider of critical social perspectives. As theorists and many sociologists become preoccupied with insular disciplinary concerns, public officials, activists, policy-makers, journalists, and media commentators have assumed the chief role of public intellectuals. Unfortunately, these individuals, though often thoughtful and insightful, are usually focused narrowly on specific issues

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or political events such as wars in the military or the Middle East conflicts or electoral politics; they are pressured to meet commercial deadlines and standards. Accordingly, their social ideas often lack the conceptual and historical depth that has been part of the social sciences. A vigorous democratic public culture is nourished by the social ideas crafted by sociologists and critical social scientists.

Why has sociological theory become increasingly isolated from public life? Sociology continues to produce theorists of impressive talent, but its culture is more and more removed from a general public culture. The growing insularity of sociological theory reflects, in part, the fact that theorists are often oriented to members of their own expert culture. Much of current sociological theory simply does not speak a broad public language; the conventions and concerns of this disciplinary culture render their ideas either inaccessible to a general public or irrelevant to the ways in which the moral and political issues of the day are discussed in everyday life. The sad truth is that sociological theory, especially in the United States, is hardly read today beyond a small circle of academic theorists.

If sociological theory is in trouble, one reason is the quest for an overarching theory of society and history. From Comte through Parsons, Habermas, and Randall Collins, theorists have tried to discover the underlying principles of social order and social change. These theorists believe that there are very general problems such as the nature of social action and social order or the relationship between the individual and social institutions that are at the core of social knowledge. It is the task of theory to settle these so-called foundational issues or to uncover the universal principles of social life. A core of theoretical principles would then guide social research and social analysis. Unfortunately, theorists have been unable to achieve anything approaching consensus on the core premises, concepts, and explanatory models of social knowledge. And, sadly, theorists' aspiration to provide secure foundations for social knowledge has often led them into a series of arcane conceptual and methodological debates that have largely proved fruitless. Sociological theorists are in danger of losing the attention of both researchers and the public.

Sociology needs to recover its role as public educator in order to contribute to a more measured and thoughtful public discussion. In this regard, I would like to see sociological theory regain its focus on issues of broad public significance. Instead of being driven by narrow disciplinary conventions and disputes, theorists should seriously try to address the key social and political debates of our time, and in an accessible language. Theorists need to recover the moral impulse at the heart of social theory, and to see themselves, once again, as public educators engaging the issues of the day. *Contested Knowledge* is animated by the original promise of modern social thinking: the idea that social theory can produce ideas that would help create a better world.

CONFLICTING VIEWS OF SOCIAL THEORY

Since the Enlightenment, the very meaning of social theory has been debated. Three views of theory have been at the center of debate: theory as scientific, philosophical, and moral.

Scientific social theory assumes that science is the only method capable of achieving reliable social knowledge. Our common-sense ideas about society as well as the social understandings of poets and novelists, journalists and social commentators, are said to express personal values and opinions. Science tells us what is real and true. The ideal of the social sciences is to discover ideas that mirror the world; by contrast, the ideas of ordinary folk mirror personal beliefs or political ideology.

Scientific theorists aim to discover laws or principles that apply to human behavior in all societies, past and present. For example, Auguste Comte searched and thought he found the laws that govern how societies establish order and change; Marx wanted to uncover the laws of capitalism; the American sociologists Randall Collins and Peter Blau tried to gather together the principles that govern key aspects of social life, for example, social conflict, order, change, peace, and war. For these theorists, the sciences of physics or biology serve as models for social theory. True knowledge requires that observations, research, and facts be organized as general principles or laws that are proven through repeated testing.

Philosophical approaches share with scientific theorists the aim to reveal timeless social truths. In some ways, philosophically oriented theorists are even more ambitious than scientific ones. Not content with uncovering general principles or social laws, philosophical theorists aspire to develop sweeping, overarching theories of human behavior and social evolution. However, instead of developing their ideas from observations and facts, philosophical theorists believe that research must be preceded by rigorous conceptual thinking. Before we can observe and record social life we must have certain ideas about the nature of social life. Do we focus on the individual or on social groups? Are individuals agents who shape society or do individuals mostly adapt to social forces? And, which social forces – religion, the economy, class, or bureaucracy – are the most important in shaping social life? In short, philosophical theorists aim to establish the core categories and ideas about human behavior and social life that would guide researchers. Perhaps the two greatest thinkers in this tradition are Talcott Parsons and Jürgen Habermas. As we'll see, they approach theory as a serious discursive project. Theory involves reasoning about the most basic aspects of social life, for example, how is social order possible or is there a pattern to social change across centuries? The aim of theory, say the philosophical theorists, is to provide the foundational concepts and ideas that will guide the work of researchers and social analysts.

The styles of scientific and philosophical theorists are very different. Scientific theorists work primarily with the observations and facts produced by researchers. They aim to organize empirical research into a set of social principles or laws. By contrast, philosophical theorists spend considerable time thinking about the ideas of other thinkers as they develop their own views about human behavior and social life. Parsons' major work, *The Structure of Social Action*, was a study of the ideas of several European thinkers; no research was discussed. His aim was to develop a general theory of social action. Similarly, Habermas's *A Theory of Communicative Action* is a virtual tour through European and American philosophy and social theory from the mid-nineteenth century to the present; he aspired to reveal the essential structure of human communication as the foundation for a general theory of society.

Theorists have tried not only to understand but to change society. While many thinkers believe that their social role should be confined to revealing social truths, others maintain that theory should contribute to changing social life. These thinkers endorse a *moral vision of social theory*. From this point of view, social knowledge is valuable because of its potential to make the world a better place to live.

Approaching theory as a moral or critical practice has been a key part of modern social thinking. Many theorists have crafted powerful social views that advocate specific social and political responses to threats to freedom and democracy. Theorists have proposed powerful critical analyses of class conflict, male dominance, the decline of religious faith, the crisis of solidarity, and the bureaucratization of society. The aim of a morally inspired theory is to alert the public to a social danger in order to prompt and sometimes guide political action.

Think of Marx's exposé of capitalism as a class-divided, exploitative type of society. His critique of capitalism aimed to contribute to a working-class social revolt. Or, to take another example, Robert Bellah and his colleagues composed *Habits of the Heart*, an empirically rich social analysis of the US, in order to alert Americans to the dangers of a culture that championed individual self-interest at the expense of community values. Feminists and queer theorists have offered critical social perspectives that challenge male and heterosexual dominance; their critiques played a pivotal role in the making of movements for gender and sexual justice.

A moral approach to theory and social analysis does not mean giving up a commitment to truth or empirical knowledge. However, thinkers who emphasize the political and moral meaning of social thinking may not necessarily view theory or research as always capable of producing hard and fast truths. These thinkers defend a distinct role for sociologists: social analysis as social criticism. For these thinkers, truths may be possible, but we cannot and should not abandon our moral and political commitment to a better world.

Despite the prominence of scientific and philosophical approaches, most theorists have in fact not given up on a moral vision of social science. Most theorists would still, if push came to shove, concede that social knowledge finds its ultimate value in whatever good for humanity comes of it. The tribe of theorists and social scientists are, by and large, a good lot, who care about people and believe that their efforts should be socially beneficial. Yet the sad truth is that this moral hope is often not acknowledged as an important criterion in judging the worth of social research and theory. It is, for most social scientists, simply a hope, a heartfelt hope, but one that is not supposed to influence decisions about methods, concepts, explanations, and research aims. This does not mean that the values and moral vision of the social scientist do not find a prominent place in social research. No matter how much a social scientist may wish to expunge moral commitments from his or her work, they remain. Unfortunately, though, while moral commitments shape social science, they are often not acknowledged or reflected upon in the work we do.

These three views of social theory are *styles* of theorizing. Often, thinkers combine these styles. Marx simultaneously engaged in a philosophical analysis of concepts, sought to uncover the laws of capitalism, and was a fierce critic of modern societies. Talcott Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* was a philosophical analysis of the

concept of social action. Subsequently, Parsons sought to apply his theoretical ideas by offering empirical explanations of Nazism, family dynamics, and modern racism. And, this tireless defender of social truth was also a relentless champion of American liberal pluralism against the socialist left and a conservative right.

There are, though, tensions among these approaches. For example, scientific approaches are hostile to the intrusion of values or political convictions into social analysis. Yet as much as scientific approaches want to stick to “just the facts,” facts and observations often cannot adjudicate between different conceptual approaches. A philosophical analysis of concepts is often necessary to get at the deeper conceptual underpinnings of empirical disputes about the social world. Or, in its quest for logically compelling foundational concepts, a philosophical approach often becomes entangled in obscure debates that are far removed from the concerns of researchers and activists or policy makers. And those who embrace a moral style must struggle with reconciling partisanship with the ideals of scholarship. Even strong advocates of a moral vision of human studies must concede that the very effectiveness of their ideas may depend on their public authority, an authority that may be weakened by their partisanship. The vital tension between a scientific, philosophical, and a moral vision will be examined as we analyze the contemporary significance of social theory.

Part I

The Rise of the Classical Tradition

Introduction to Part I	9
1 The Idea of a Science of Society: The Enlightenment and Auguste Comte	11
• Auguste Comte	16
2 The Revolutionary Theory of Karl Marx	22
• The Unity of Theory and Practice	22
• Historical Materialism: A Revolutionary Science	26
• <i>Das Kapital</i> : The Logic of Social Revolution	29
• Tensions between a Scientific and Moral Vision	32
3 The Promise of Sociology: Emile Durkheim	36
• Durkheim's Liberal Vision of History and Modernity	38
• <i>Suicide</i> : Individualism and Community Revisited	42
• Science, Truth, and Moral Hope	45
4 The Ironic Social Theory of Max Weber	48
• Puritanism and the Making of the Middle Class	50
• Explaining Western Modernity and the Irony of History	52
• Charisma and Bureaucracy: The Modern Dream Turned Nightmare	55
• Science, Truth, and Values	58
Afterword to Part I	61