

FOURTH EDITION

CONTEMPORARY SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

CONTINUING
THE CLASSICAL
TRADITION

RUTH A. WALLACE / ALISON WOLF



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Continuing the Classical Tradition

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Prentice Hall
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

Wallace, Ruth A.

Contemporary sociological theory : continuing the classical tradition / Ruth A. Wallace, Alison Wolf,—4th ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-13-036245-X

1. Sociology. 2. Sociology—Philosophy. I. Wolf, Alison.

II. Title

HM51.W15 1995

94-43559

301'.01—dc20

CIP

To Our Families and Students

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A Simon & Schuster Company
Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 07632

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Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5

ISBN 0-13-036245-X

Prentice-Hall International (UK) Limited, *London*

Prentice-Hall of Australia Pty. Limited, *Sydney*

Prentice-Hall Canada Inc., *Toronto*

Prentice-Hall Hispanoamericana, S.A., *Mexico*

Prentice-Hall of India Private Limited, *New Delhi*

Prentice-Hall of Japan, Inc., *Tokyo*

Simon & Schuster Asia Pte. Ltd., *Singapore*

Editora Prentice-Hall do Brasil, Ltda., *Rio de Janeiro*



Preface

This book discusses and analyzes sociological theory as it is practiced today. Its major focus is on those writers whose work has most influenced social theory and the way sociologists currently approach and analyze their subject matter.

Contemporary sociology, at almost every point, builds on and incorporates the classics, and especially the work of Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Mead. We believe that the best way to study and understand theory is to follow the ways in which the work of classical writers has been incorporated into that of later sociologists, and to see how theoretical insights are actually used by people to explain social developments. We have therefore described the contributions of classical theorists directly when discussing the historical roots of each perspective. Throughout the text we also point out the many ways in which contemporary theorists and researchers alike make active use of classical ideas.

In the following pages we describe the central ideas and arguments of these thinkers and the ways in which they provide a number of quite distinct perspectives on society and social behavior. Although we also present some assessment and criticism of their theories, our purpose is to provide readers with a clear summary of modern sociological theory's arguments, not to engage in a detailed critique of each approach or to espouse a particular perspective. To give readers as clear an idea as possible of the authors' own style and presentation, we have included a number of direct quotations in the text. We have also tried particularly to show how sociological

theories inform social scientists' empirical research and to demonstrate the close links between sociological theory and the ways in which we all, sociologists and nonsociologists alike, deal with and try to understand our world. To this end we have included throughout the book empirical examples of how a given perspective is used in both sociological research and more general explanation.

While we have made every effort to avoid unnecessary jargon and to express ideas as simply and as clearly as possible, much of the subject matter is, inevitably, quite complex. We have tried, therefore, to follow Albert Einstein's dictum, "Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not one bit simpler." At the same time it is not a precondition for the reader to be a student of sociology already. We conceive of our audience as comprising anyone interested in the contributions social science can make to understanding our social world.

We have been very aware during our work of the old but still raging debate about whether any writers, but especially social scientists, can deal objectively with their subject matter. In one sense, namely our choice of what writers and what aspects of their work to present, our own values and preferences must obtrude. Within that framework, however, we have tried unashamedly to maintain the traditional scientific values of unbiased description, objectivity, and, indeed, reason; for while they may never be fully realizable, it seems to us of the utmost importance that scholars—and the world—not abandon them as standards. We have also paid particular attention to whether or not a given perspective is successful in dealing with and answering a range of concrete questions and problems.

PLAN OF THE TEXT

This revised text discusses five major perspectives of modern sociological theory: functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and theories of rational choice. It also provides an overview of recent theoretical developments. For this edition the text has been updated generally, and a number of significant additions have also been made. First, the coverage of feminist theory has been further expanded. Feminist theory has been described thus:

First, gender comprises a central focus or subject matter of the theory. Feminist theory seeks ultimately to understand the gendered nature of virtually all social relations, institutions, and processes. Second, gender relations are viewed as a problem. By this I mean that feminist theory seeks to understand how gender is related to social inequities, strains, and contradictions. Finally, gender relations are not viewed as either natural or immutable. Rather, the gender-related status quo is viewed as the product of sociocultural

and historical forces which have been created, and are constantly re-created by humans, and therefore can potentially be changed by human agency.¹

As this definition suggests, feminist theorists draw on a wide range of theoretical orientations. Rather than creating a separate chapter for feminist theory, we emphasize its mainstream importance, and the way in which feminist theorists have expanded the horizons of different perspectives, by discussing their work throughout this text. As in the previous edition, questions about the role of women in contemporary society form a research theme to which each chapter returns. This edition also includes two new sections devoted explicitly to (1) Dorothy Smith's feminist standpoint theory (in Chapter Five), and (2) Patricia Hill Collins' Black feminist thought (in Chapter Four). Other major changes include an expanded treatment of the work of Pierre Bourdieu (Chapter Three); a new section on the sociology of the body (Chapter Seven); a discussion of post-modernism (Chapter Seven); and a discussion of recent work by Niklas Luhmann on risk (Chapter Two); by James Coleman and other rational choice theorists on social activity (Chapter Six); and by Randall Collins on geopolitical theory (Chapter Three).

Chapter One discusses the structure of sociological theories and their practical importance as a way of analyzing and understanding how human societies work. It also introduces two important research themes. One of these—the role of women in contemporary society—has already been mentioned; and the second is the working of the huge formal educational systems which characterize modern society. Each major theoretical perspective can provide important but partial answers to these questions, and they correspondingly provide a theme woven throughout the book.

The following five chapters on functionalism, conflict theory, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and theories of rational choice then follow a common pattern. In each case, we set out the basic assumptions and key concepts of the theory concerned and the questions it raises and attempts to answer. We identify the intellectual roots of the approach and discuss the insights which the contemporary theorists derived from previous scholars. We then describe in detail the work of the perspective's major theorists, with particular emphasis on their most recent or current arguments. Throughout each section we stress the reciprocal relationship between theory on the one hand and sociological research and general social observation on the other. We show how contemporary theorists themselves use their approaches to analyze concrete phenomena, including but not confined to the educational system and the role of women, and how

¹Janet S. Chafetz, *Feminist Sociology: An Overview of Contemporary Theories* (Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock, 1988), p. 5.

the research of their colleagues draws on and embodies different theoretical perspectives. We also illustrate how the outlook of contemporary theorists is reflected in the way nonsociologists look at and discuss the world. Chapter Seven discusses a number of theoretical developments of considerable interest and relevance to contemporary sociology: namely, structuralism and post-modernism, structuration theory, and the sociology of the body. Finally, Chapter Eight synthesizes the major perspectives' contributions to answering the questions posed in Chapter One, and briefly discusses historical trends in social theory.

This book has been a joint effort throughout, with no senior or junior authorship. Ruth Wallace took primary responsibility for the chapters on functionalism, symbolic interactionism, and phenomenology, and Alison Wolf for the chapters on conflict theory, theories of rational choice, and alternative perspectives.

In writing this book, we have learned a great deal and have both come to appreciate more fully the insights and achievements of the theorists we describe. We would like to acknowledge our intellectual debt to them and also to the many students whose questions and comments have contributed to our work.

Herbert Blumer, Anthony Heath, Patricia Lengermann, J. Clyde Mitchell, Robert Moran, Whitney Pope, Neil Smelser, and Martin Wolf all made major contributions to our thinking through their suggestions and questions on this and/or earlier editions. Our editors, Edward Stanford, Susan Taylor, Bill Webber, Nancy Roberts, and Sharon Chambliss, as well as a number of Prentice Hall reviewers—including James T. Duke, Brigham Young University; D. Paul Johnson, Texas Tech University; and Robert Lang, The State University of New Jersey—gave us useful suggestions.

We would also like to acknowledge the help of Janet Saltzman Chafetz, Ralf Dahrendorf, Christine Dolan, Vance Grant, Wade Hook, Iain McLean, Frank Mars, Carlyle Maw, Kathryn Orlans, Vernon Reynolds, David Sciulli, R. Stephen Warner, and Jacqueline Wiseman.

We thank Joy Alexander for encouraging us to write on theory and Edmund Wolf for his help in translating. Without the time so generously given by Winnie Potter, the late Rebecca Wolf, and James Coriden, this book would still be in manuscript form. Jonathan, Benjamin, and Rachel Wolf maintained our sense of proportion and helped by being themselves.

R.A.W.

A.W.



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CHAPTER ONE

The Understanding of Society

The Structure of Sociological Theory

**Theory and Understanding: The Examples
of Formal Education and the Role of Women
in Contemporary Society**

2 The Understanding of Society

Reading theory has not been something which people have generally looked forward to with delight. Often they see it as just so many groups of rarefied abstractions related only to each other, like a set of crossword puzzles, free-floating above the "real world" of schools, factories, and suburbs, elections, weddings, strikes, muggings, and tennis matches. This is a mistake. Far from being able to separate theory from real life, our whole way of looking at the world depends on our theoretical perspective. To read sociological theory is to understand a great deal more about what we and our world are like and how unordinary and ambiguous the most taken-for-granted and everyday aspects of our life may be.

When sociologists "do sociology," they do not come to their subject matter cold, their minds a blank. Whether their topic is the way people deal with death, or the whole evolution and probable future of modern society, they focus on particular aspects of what is going on.¹ They approach their subject with certain assumptions, they emphasize particular research methods, and they have particular types of questions they want answered. This means that their research is based on the ways of looking at things which sociological theories advance. What the theories do is to lay these out in an explicit and systematic way.

Very much the same is true of the world outside sociology. In some famous remarks, John Maynard Keynes, whose own ideas dominated government economic management from the Second World War until the present, argued that ideas "both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from any intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back."² The different ways of looking at our society that contemporary sociological theories advance are reflected in the arguments and observations of society's members as a whole.

The effect that sociological theory may have on people's behavior and on the course of history is demonstrated most dramatically by the work of Karl Marx. But a journalist trying to explain Watergate and the resignation of Richard Nixon, a marriage counselor grappling with rising divorce rates, and new students on campus trying to understand what is going on, also draw on notions about how people behave and how social institutions work which embody certain theoretical assumptions. Furthermore, our very ability to talk about "the president's unconstitutional behavior" or about "granting someone a degree" depends on a whole range of facts

¹For the use of theoretical perspectives to discuss these particular topics, see Chapter Three (Collins), Chapter Four (Part Two: Blumer), and Chapters Two (Parsons) and Three (Habermas).

²John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1936), p. 383.

about ourselves and our listeners. Sociological theories do not comprise a world of formal, empty boxes, irrelevant to the world of work and family, power, freedom, discrimination, and oppression. Far from it. They have everything to do with that world—how we see it, understand it, and explain it, as well as how we act in it and thus what it becomes.

THE STRUCTURE OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

Sociological theorists are distinctive because they express their assumptions or hypotheses very systematically and discuss in a very comprehensive way how far their theories explain social life. Even more important, they provide new insights into behavior and the workings of societies. These, in turn, are disseminated, and in years to come they may affect the ideas of many who have never read the original work.

The systematic way in which sociological theory sets out its ideas is a quality it shares with the theory of any other discipline: psychology, physics, genetics, and the rest. Shared, too, is a second important quality: it relates innumerable events, with many apparent differences, to general principles that bring out their similarities. Student protests, strikes, and food riots may all be treated as examples of conflict within hierarchical organizations, and the important qualities they have in common may be thus defined.³ Similarly, counselors' interviews with high school students and trials for murder may both be examined in the light of what they show about the shared ideas of a society's members and the creative and unpredictable dynamics of human interaction.⁴

However, although sociological theory shares the essential systematizing qualities of all theory, in other ways it often differs from what is usually meant by the term. The classical definition of a theory⁵ is essentially a *deductive* one. It starts with definitions of some general concepts (and, often, a few clearly stated assumptions); lays out rules about how to classify the things we observe in terms of these different categories; and then puts forward a number of general propositions about the concepts. Once observers have classified their subject matter, a generalized theory allows them to deduce logically a number of quite specific statements about its nature and behavior. The laws of Mendelian genetics are a good example, for their general statements about the pairing of genes and distribution of characteristics among offspring can be used to deduce statements about an enormous range of species. Since such theories are also very powerful instruments in

³See Chapter Three.

⁴See Chapters Four and Five.

⁵One of the best such discussions can be found in Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), especially pp. 90–105.

4 The Understanding of Society

predicting and hence manipulating our environment, they are essential to almost every aspect of modern life, from stockbreeding to manufacturing rollerblades.⁶

Much sociological theory is of this very clearly defined type; but much is not. Robert Merton, whose own functionalist theory we discuss later, has emphasized that "much of what is described in textbooks as sociological theory consists of general orientations towards substantive materials."⁷ For example, if a theory puts forward a number of very general propositions about human motivation, it may imply that some sorts of behavior are more likely than others and thereby provide the observer with a handle on a situation. However, it will supply very little in the way of concrete propositions.

Such general propositions are not, in themselves, inconsistent with the idea of a deductive social science. Some theorists whose work is of this kind are very interested in making predictive or testable statements about social organization and the development of society.⁸ Others, however, are not concerned with such deductive "scientific" theory at all. Indeed, they may deny that such an approach is valid when one is dealing with the behavior of human beings.⁹ Instead of being about regularities in the content of human behavior or the nature of social organization, their general statements describe how people's social interaction proceeds.¹⁰

Because of these differences, sociological theory may look like a group of perspectives with very little in common except their general and formalizing approach and their concern with understanding human behavior. However, even those theories which are farthest removed from the deductive model involve a set of concepts, which are often described as the most elementary "building blocks" of any theory. Basically, a *concept* can be

⁶The actual process of scientific research and discovery is far more complex than this description of theoretical structure implies. Good (and very different) discussions of what is involved in scientific theory construction are to be found in Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Hutchinson, 1959); Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Stephen Toulmin, "From Form to Function: Philosophy and History of Science in the 1950's and Now," *Daedalus*, 106, no. 3 (Summer 1977); Nagel, *The Structure of Science*.

⁷Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, Enlarged Edition (New York: The Free Press, 1968), p. 141.

⁸See, for example, the work of Dahrendorf on the importance of conflict, or much of Parsons' theory (Chapters Three and Two).

⁹See, for example, the work of Garfinkel (Chapter Five) and Blumer (Chapter Four).

¹⁰For good discussions of the debate about whether social science is essentially different from natural science and whether it requires different and unique types of theory and argument, see Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science and Its Relations to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958); George Caspar Homans, *The Nature of Social Science* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967); Randall Collins, *Conflict Sociology: Toward an Explanatory Science*, Chapter I (New York: Academic Press, 1975); Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1984).

described as a word or symbol that represents a phenomenon (a label we use to name and classify our perceptions and experiences) or an abstract idea generalized from particular instances. Durkheim's concept, *anomie*, and Marx's concept, *alienation*, are classic examples of sociological concepts.

The key concepts of a theory also enable us to "see" parts of social reality that may have escaped us otherwise. Concepts are an essential first step in understanding and analyzing social phenomena. Throughout this book we will define the central concepts of each theory to enable the reader to see the various aspects of social reality revealed by each perspective and thus to have a better understanding of society.

Among the major dimensions along which sociological theories differ, we have already identified their acceptance or rejection of the deductive model drawn from natural science.¹¹ This is a crucial aspect of their *methodology*. Theories also differ in three other significant aspects. These are their *subject matter*, the *assumptions* underlying their approach, and the *types of questions* they believe social theory can and should answer. The following section provides an overview of the current main alternatives as exemplified by the theories discussed in this text.

Subject Matter

In their subject matter, theoretical perspectives divide rather clearly between those perspectives that are concerned with the large-scale characteristics of social structure and roles, or *macrosociology*, and those concerned with person-to-person encounters and the details of human interaction and communication, or *microsociology*.

Functionalism and conflict theory are the two approaches concerned with the overall characteristics of social structure and the general nature of social institutions. They emphasize the relations between (and implications of) general categories of social position, such as Marx's "classes" or the "affectively neutral" relationships which Parsons saw as predominant in industrial societies. It is in the context of functionalism and conflict theory that discussions of social evolution, the most wide-ranging of all sociological subjects, are found.

This does not mean that macrosociological theories necessarily consider the perceptions and decisions of individual people to be irrelevant to their arguments. We would agree with Smelser that "hypotheses that link positions in the social structure with behavior always rest on at least implicit psychological assertions,"¹² and particularly on general ideas about

¹¹For a full discussion of the particular senses in which these terms are used, see the section on methodology.

¹²Neil J. Smelser, ed., *Sociology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1973), p. 13.