

VOLUME I

The Formative Years
A Reader

SOCIAL THEORY

SECOND EDITION

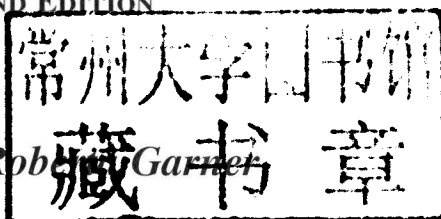
edited by Roberta Garner

SOCIAL THEORY
A READER
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THE FORMATIVE YEARS

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Garnett



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SOCIAL THEORY

For Larry, Michael, and Julia

PREFACE

I would like to share with my readers the excitement of reading social theory. My own early efforts to read works of theory were often frustrating—theory at first seemed dry and abstract. It became vital when I saw theoretical concepts used in studies of real-life situations and experiences, close to home or in distant cultures; so one goal of this book is to connect classical and early twentieth century theoretical writing to more down-to-earth modern empirical studies. Another is to show how ideas develop both through controversies and continuities. Sociology has never been a field with a single dominant paradigm and a smooth accumulation of knowledge. It is a rush of intellectual whitewater, with many currents, eddies, and unexpected waterfalls. I emphasize the restless, rebellious side of social thought; it appears throughout the book in the body of Marxist theory and the spirit of Nietzsche's influence on Weber, Simmel, and Foucault.

A word about using this reader in teaching social theory courses: it can fit into a frenzied quarter, a fast-moving semester, or two leisurely quarters. It can be paired with any number of theory texts. It can be used as the main or supplementary selection in social and political thought courses, as well as sociology courses.

My colleagues at DePaul create a warm, congenial working environment. Noel Barker is always there to encourage me to think about sociology, as he has so many students, colleagues, and friends. I would like to thank Ted Manley and Heidi Nast for specific suggestions, especially ones that challenge my comfortable assumptions. Bob Rotenberg introduced me to several global perspectives. Melissa Haeffner, Christina Suarez, Valerie Paulson, Monique Randall, Rachel Hanes, and Lydia Yip helped to turn plans into pages. My students in the sociological theory core course—which I have taught off and on since the early 1970s—sharpen my ideas and force me to find engaging empirical studies to liven up theoretical concepts.

At Broadview Press, Betsy Struthers brought the book into being: my ideas would not have become a reality without her work in obtaining permissions, organizing the material, and streamlining my writing. Michael Harrison was supportive and encouraging throughout the process, and Barbara Conolly guided the manuscript through key stages.

About the Second Edition

I am delighted that Broadview Press gave me the opportunity to prepare a second edition. Anne Brackenbury was an inspiring and congenial mentor throughout the process. Judith Earnshaw, Chris Griffin, and Zack Taylor made it happen. At DePaul, my colleague Black Hawk Hancock stretched my thinking about theory and encouraged me to explore the dark side of Erving Goffman.

Preparing the second edition offered me an opportunity to rethink Friedrich Engels's contribution to social thought, and I have given him nearly equal billing with Karl Marx. I use the phrase "Marx and Engels" consistently when referring to their co-authored work or their general theoretical contributions. I find myself strongly drawn to Engels's interest in the natural sciences, his attention to gender inequality, and his careful observations of working-class urban neighbourhoods and the situation of Irish immigrants in England. These themes in his work connect to contemporary emphases on gender inequality, global cities, and transnational migration, as well as the ongoing controversies over the relationship of the natural and the social sciences.

In the second edition, I corrected the egregious omission of Erving Goffman from the first edition. I refreshed several selections and reorganized the material in the third part of the book, creating a new chapter on media and culture. Fredric Jameson's essay on post-modern culture has found a happier home in this chapter, where it is joined by a new Stuart Hall excerpt on media encoding and decoding. Thanks to a tip from my house painter, John Wilson, I discovered Guy Debord and am thrilled to include a selection from *The Society of the Spectacle*. My colleague Shu-Ju Ada Cheng contributed a previously unpublished article to illustrate the richness and complexity of feminist social theory. Compelling contemporary topics are examined by John D'Emilio, who explores capitalism and gay identity; Saskia Sassen, global cities; and David Harvey, neo-liberalism. I am happy to include Jean Anyon's remarkable observations of classrooms, an essay that affirms the power of theoretical knowledge.

My family's love makes me feel happy in my work and gives meaning to my projects and endeavours—I am very thankful to all of them.

READING THEORY: A GENERAL INTRODUCTION

In the following pages, we will read the words and ideas of social theorists. We will find continuity: a number of themes appear repeatedly, and certain questions continue to be asked. The answers may change with time and circumstances, but the questions persist. Social theorists also confront and challenge each other's ideas. Theory grows and develops as a result of this controversy. Disagreements force theorists to sharpen their thinking, to look for new empirical evidence, and to discard ideas that don't work.

This reader is organized around continuity and confrontation among ideas. "Continuity" involves the revisiting and rethinking of theories and theoretical questions. "Confrontation" means the growth of theories through disagreement and controversies among theorists.

We will reflect on the relationship between theories and empirical reality, the world of experience and everyday life. Theories are claims that there are patterns in the empirical world; theorists invent concepts that help us to see these patterns. The concepts point to key features of the empirical world. Theorists not only chart the real world, they also try to explain the patterns they see. As social reality changes, theories have to be revised or discarded.

Although theorists challenge each other, it is usually difficult to confirm or disprove a theory. Theories are interpretations of reality; they are not research hypotheses that can be tested with empirical data.

Theorists not only chart and explain social reality; often they also question it. Many theorists take a "negative-critical" view of social institutions. They do not believe that this is the best of all possible worlds: they point to injustices and inequalities among human beings and hope that their ideas can contribute to ending this state of affairs. Controversies among theorists are not only about ways of interpreting reality, but also about prospects for changing it.

Several metaphors are often used to talk about theories. They are said to be constructed or built: theorists make theoretical frameworks, constructions of concepts that are connected to each other. A second commonly used metaphor is visual: theories are perspectives or points of view that focus on some aspect of social reality.

A third metaphor portrays theory as a flowing, changing river, with a mainstream and more controversial countercurrents. The mainstream is formed by ideas that are widely accepted among intellectuals at major universities and publishing houses; the countercurrents are formed by critical and dissenting scholars. Historically, the mainstream has usually been non-Marxist and the

major countercurrent, Marxist. There are times when the currents are sharply separated, as in the 1950s, and other times—such as the end of the twentieth century—when they swirl together. Even when they were separate, they were fluid currents, not watertight pipelines. It is a good idea not to think of sociological traditions as completely rigid, distinct systems of ideas; theories have always influenced each other.

Overall, the entire enterprise of theory results in a complex and ever-changing set of overlapping as well as contested ideas. Theorists borrow from each other, recontextualize other theorists' concepts in new frameworks, adapt theory to new empirical and political issues, and challenge each other. A number of questions appear in many theories and form points of connection.

1. What is the nature of modern society, and to what extent is capitalism its key characteristic?
2. How are different types of institutions connected to each other in societies? More specifically, what is the impact of technology, the economy, and culture on each other and on other institutions?
3. How can we best picture the interplay of micro and macro levels of action? By "micro" we mean individual actions and small-scale interactions and by "macro" we mean institutions at the level of societies, nations, and the global system.
4. What is the mix of agency (purposeful human action) and structure (constraining limits) in outcomes? To what extent do human beings "make their own history" individually and collectively, and to what extent is it "made for them" by circumstances inherited from the past?
5. What is the mix of class (economic position) and status (other bases of identity such as racial/ethnic group, gender, and religion) in individual and collective outcomes? How are identities formed? How do identities become the basis of collective action?
6. How do human beings construct social reality?

The works selected here illustrate different ways of thinking about these questions. Some are down to earth and address everyday life, while others are very abstract. They come from both the mainstream of academic sociology and the countercurrents. The reader is divided into three parts. Each corresponds to a distinct period in the history of social thought. These differ from each other in terms of the themes and problems addressed by social theory, styles of doing theory, methods of research, and the countries where social theorists worked. The order and placement of the selections allows the reader to see how theories confront each other and how they change historically.

The introductions to each period, type of theory, and individual theorist point out these connections. Biographies of the individual theorists are touched on only briefly; these can be found in many other places (see the Readings at the end of each chapter). In any case, a reading of ideas should never be reduced to the reported facts of an individual's life. Knowing facts (but which facts?) about a person may help us to understand why certain intellectual puzzles appeared in her or his imagination, but ideas take on a life of their own and outlive the individual. Religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, social class, and psychological states may be factors in the development of these ideas, but they do not explain them. Yet marginality of one kind or another gives a critical edge to a theorist's work, shattering the comfortable taken-for-grantedness in which majorities live their lives; all theorizing is an attack on taken-for-grantedness and in that respect comes easier to minorities.

It is important to keep in mind that individuals change in the course of their lives, and so the writings of a theorist's youth are often different from those of old age. As the maturing and aging process and the historical circumstances change, so do the ideas. Sometimes hope is replaced by pessimism, especially when old age coincides with historical disasters, as with several of our theorists and World War I. Even in the happiest historical conditions, old age may bring about a sense of limited possibilities, replacing the boundless optimism and freedom of youth, so it may tilt a theorist's work more toward structural determination and away from a focus on autonomy and meaningful action.

Not just writers but readers themselves change, the historical conditions change, and so the texts do not remain the same. To read Marx after the collapse of the Berlin Wall is to encounter a different Marx than when the same passages were read in the 1960s. When we reread these theorists in the future, we will encounter new perspectives to look at the world in which we live.

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PART I

BEGINNINGS

INTRODUCTION

In Part I we will discover how social theory emerged as a coherent, continuous enterprise in modern Europe. Prior to this period, there had been many astute observers of human societies, such as the Greek historian Herodotus and the North African writer Ibn Khaldun. These writers not only observed cultures and societies, they tried to explain the differences they saw; for example, they tried to relate customs to religious beliefs and culture to political systems, and they made use of explanatory factors such as climate and the history of institutions. These accounts and reflections were not, as yet, part of an ongoing enterprise of social theory in which scholars systematically addressed each other's ideas. Before modern times in Europe, continuity and confrontation were missing from social observation; the observations remained unconnected to each other, and writers about human societies did not yet have the sense of participating in an ongoing tradition. By the nineteenth century, this tradition had taken shape, and social theory had become increasingly an enterprise carried out by a self-conscious community of scholars and theorists.

From the beginning social theory was closely connected to ideology; the analysis of society was always connected to different points of view about the nature of the good society and the causes of social problems. Sociology was born as a modern intellectual enterprise at the same time that ideologies like conservatism, liberalism, socialism, and nationalism emerged, more or less at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth; the ideas of sociology as the pursuit of knowledge are often close to the ideas of these contending political forces.

In addition, social theory became increasingly tied to academic disciplines. Social theory became part of the field called "sociology," although political scientists, social revolutionaries, and generic social theorists who did not claim a specific academic discipline also investigated the subject. By the end of the nineteenth century, many social theorists taught at universities, at least part of their lives. Marxist theorists were less likely than others to hold university positions, because they saw themselves as revolutionaries, not pedagogues, and because they were perceived as subversives by academic departments.

During this period, every major theorist was a man and a European. Women did not enter organized scholarly intellectual life till the early twentieth century; they published books of travel observations and insightful memoirs, but were simply not included in the more abstract, ongoing conversations about the nature of society that formed the heart of social theory. Equally excluded were all people in colonized societies and in regions outside of the western, Christian world. Most workers and peasants, wherever they lived, were excluded, because they were unlikely to obtain the education needed to enter intel-

lectual and academic life. Elites in the Americas and eastern and southern Europe were marginally included in modern, western intellectual life if they spoke English, French, or German, and appeared like western Europeans in looks and culture; but both distance and western European prejudices kept them at the edge of academic and intellectual life.

The second phase of this period, the later nineteenth century, is called the classical period of social theory. It is dominated by the work of four theorists: Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel. Durkheim wrote in French, the other three in German. Their work defined the subject matter, central themes, and basic concepts of sociology and the social sciences. All four focused on the nature of modern society; they defined it, each in his own way. They analyzed the effect of social changes such as industrialization, urbanization, the spread of capitalism, revolutions, and the formation of bureaucracies and modern states. These changes are still evident at the beginning of the twenty-first century, and for that reason, the work of the classical theorists remains alive.

CHAPTER ONE

INVENTING THE LENS

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter we will look at the origins of social theory as a systematic pursuit of knowledge about society.

The story begins in Renaissance Italy, when Niccolò Machiavelli wrote about the exercise of power as it really was, not as it should be. The writers of the French Enlightenment continued to look at society as it was, but with a critical eye, in hopes of understanding how human beings could be liberated from cruelty, irrationality, and superstition. Their critical approach brought forth an opposition, a new breed of conservatives prepared to defend existing institutions with the same tools of observation and analysis that the Enlightenment used to attack them. Confrontation was born as a mode of discourse in social theory; the process of debate forced each side to clarify concepts, make its thinking coherent and systematic, and assemble empirical evidence.

The chapter closes with Auguste Comte's early attempt at synthesis, based on the claim that it is possible to preserve social order and hasten progress, both at the same time. He insisted that the structure of society, above and beyond the action of the individual, is a level of reality that requires its own form of inquiry. This idea marks the birth of sociology as a systematic pursuit of knowledge.