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Raymond
Aron

*Translated by
Richard Howard
and
Helen Weaver*

Main Currents in Sociological Thought II

Durkheim

Pareto

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MAIN CURRENTS IN SOCIOLOGICAL THOUGHT

VOLUME II

Durkheim, Pareto, Weber

BY RAYMOND ARON

Translated from the French by
RICHARD HOWARD and HELEN WEAVER

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Preface

THIS VOLUME, like the one that preceded it, is based on a course taught at the Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines at the University of Paris a few years ago. These lectures, like the previous ones, were not written down in advance. My friend Irving Kristol succeeded in convincing me that these remarks, which were first mimeographed for the convenience of my students, deserved to be corrected, revised, and finally offered to a larger audience. The indulgence of those who reviewed the first volume—even those who were most severe—prompts me not to reply to them but to point out the purpose and limits of this historical study.

The criticism most frequently addressed to the first volume was the lack of precision in my definition of sociology. How is one to reconstruct the past of a discipline whose objectives, methods, and boundaries are not exactly determined? Such, in one form or another, is the question that was asked of me or the reproach that was addressed to me; a question or reproach that was all the more legitimate because the English title promised something more than, or in any case something different from, the French title.

The course was entitled “The Great Doctrines of Historical Sociology.” A *doctrine* is more than or different from

a *theory*. The word *doctrine* suggests a complex body of judgments of fact and judgments of value, a social philosophy as well as a system of concepts or of general propositions. Moreover, the adjective *historical* linked with the term *sociology* indicated the orientation of my curiosity: I was especially interested in those sociologists who presented an interpretation of modern society, if not of universal history. Finally, I was more interested in great writers than I was in schools or currents of thought. Auguste Comte invented the word *sociology*; is he much more deserving of the name sociologist than Montesquieu, Karl Marx, or Alexis de Tocqueville, who did not know the word and might not have accepted unreservedly all that the word stands for today?

The idea for these lectures came to me during an international congress of sociology. Our colleagues from the Eastern countries continued to present the Marxist theses and the laws of historical development as the truth of the science. The Western sociologists listened to these speeches with indifference or boredom and consistently presented empirical or analytical studies which alone, in their eyes, were worthy of being considered scientific. The contrast between sociologists who identified themselves with Marxism and academic Western sociologists (with the exception of a few Western Marxists) was so striking that I asked myself whether there existed a community among the two and thus among the sociologists or pre-sociologists of yesterday who were philosophers as well as scientists, like Montesquieu, Comte, Marx, or Tocqueville, and the sociologists of today, who believe in research by questionnaire.

To this question I would, of course, give a provisional answer. In my opinion there is a certain solidarity. In any case, the continuity between Marx and Max Weber and between Max Weber and Talcott Parsons is obvious, as is the continuity between Auguste Comte and Durkheim and between Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. But to bring out this solidarity or continuity it was necessary to limit oneself at the outset to a relatively vague definition of sociology—the would-be *science* of the

social as such, whether on the elementary level of interpersonal relations or on the macroscopic level of global society.

The method I have followed is certainly not the only one possible. Modern sociology has two principal sources: the politico-social ideas or doctrines on the one hand, and the administrative statistics, surveys, and empirical investigations on the other. For several years Professor Paul Lazarsfeld has been conducting, with the help of his students, a historical investigation of this other current of modern sociology. It is possible to argue that the empirical and quantitative sociology of today owes more to Quételet and Le Play than it does to Montesquieu or Auguste Comte. But my tastes and abilities have predisposed me in the other direction. I was talking to students, and with the freedom permitted by improvisation. Instead of constantly asking myself what properly belongs to what is rightly called sociology, I have tried to grasp the essential thought of these philosopher-sociologists without disregarding what we consider to be the specific intention of sociology and without forgetting, either, that for them this intention was inseparable from philosophical conceptions and from a political ideal. Perhaps it is no different with the sociologists of our time as soon as they venture onto the terrain of macrosociology, as soon as they attempt a global interpretation of society.

The method I have adopted in this second volume does not differ, I think, from the one I followed in the first. Once again I have attempted a synthetic reconstruction of the thought of three great thinkers, closer to us than Montesquieu or Auguste Comte, but more ambitious than the sociologists of today. Here again, I have not rigorously separated the properly scientific contribution from the philosophical or political ideas. Such a separation, which might be necessary in a history of the science, was incompatible with a history of scientists, with these sketches for intellectual portraits.

Portraits, and sketches even more so, always reflect to some extent the personality of the painter. Whatever effort

one makes to be impartial, one never succeeds in concealing sympathies or antipathies. I am not even sure that success would be desirable: a teacher or writer may have a better chance of holding the attention of his students or readers if he reveals both the sentiments he feels and a determination not to abandon himself to them.

In the foregoing volume I identified myself with the school of the liberal sociologists, Montesquieu and Tocqueville, not without a certain irony, since I declared myself to be a "belated descendant" of this school. To tell the truth, my thought owes nothing to that of Montesquieu or Tocqueville, which I have studied seriously only in the last few years, whereas for over thirty years I have incessantly read and reread the work of Marx.

This opposition between familiarity and sympathy is not to be found in the present volume. I am afraid I am more severe, perhaps even unfair, to Durkheim than I was to Marx. Not that I attribute to Durkheim any idea that he did not express or any error that he did not commit; but instead of emphasizing the in some respects inspired scientific invention that is demonstrated in each of his three major books, I insist, perhaps more than I should, on the sociological and philosophical dogmatism that motivated him. I must force myself to recognize the merits, however splendid, of Durkheim, whereas Max Weber never irritates me even when I feel most remote from him. As for Pareto, he no longer provokes me to any strong reaction one way or the other.

This second volume leads only as far as the threshold of the modern period, the one that began on the eve of World War II and has been developing for twenty years. It would only be in a later volume—if circumstances permit me to write one—that I might attempt an answer to my original questions: Does the quantitative, empirical, analytical sociology of today implicitly contain an interpretation of modern society? Does it suggest a view of historical development? At what point does science end and journalism begin? Is it inevitable that the books that have the loudest repercussions, for example W. W. Rostow's *The Stages of*

Economic Growth, be judged severely by professional economists or sociologists? Is the time of the “great doctrines of historical sociology” definitively past?

Paris

R.A.

May 1967

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Introduction

Three Thinkers and Their Generation

PERHAPS THE FIRST thing to be said about Vilfredo Pareto (an Italian), Emile Durkheim (a Frenchman), and Max Weber (a German) is that they belong to the same European generation. Pareto was born in 1848, Durkheim in 1858, and Weber in 1864. Durkheim died in 1917, Max Weber in 1920, and Pareto in 1923. All three belong to the second half of the nineteenth century; and it can be said that their ideas were formed in the last quarter or the last third of the nineteenth century, and were relevant to the historical reality of Europe at the turn of the twentieth century. All three had published the greater part of their work by the outbreak of World War I. All three lived in that period of European history retrospectively regarded as a privileged age (*la belle époque*). As I think Spengler has said, the end of the nineteenth century was the least warlike phase of the history of Europe. Europe was relatively peaceful. Memories of war were dim. The wars of the nineteenth century—the wars between 1815 and 1914—had all been short and limited, and they had not fundamentally altered the course of European history.

It might be imagined that these authors took an optimistic view of the historical moment in which they lived. But the fact of the matter is quite the opposite. All three, albeit in

different ways, were of the opinion that European society was in crisis. This opinion is not in itself very original; there are few generations which have not had the impression of living through a crisis or a turning point. Indeed, what would be most difficult to find, at least after the sixteenth century, is a European generation that believed itself to be living in a stabilized period. I should say that the impression of stability is almost always retrospective. In any case, all three men were decidedly of the opinion that European society was passing through a phase of profound change.

It is not too much to say that the fundamental theme of their thought—and, in their view, the fundamental cause of this crisis—was the relation between religion and science.

Durkheim, Pareto, and Weber all have in common a desire to be scientists. In their age, as much or more so than in ours, the sciences seemed to professors to provide the model for precise thinking, successful thinking, one might even say the only model for valid thinking. As sociologists, therefore, all three wanted to be scientists. But as sociologists they also, albeit by different paths, rediscovered Comte's idea, namely, that societies can maintain their coherence only through common beliefs. Now, they all observed that common beliefs of a transcendent order, as bequeathed by tradition, had been shaken by the development of scientific thought. Nothing was more commonplace at the end of the nineteenth century than the idea of an irreconcilable contradiction between religious faith and science. In a sense all three agreed that this contradiction existed. But precisely because they were scientific sociologists, they recognized the necessity, for social stability, of the religious beliefs subjected to erosion by the advance of science. As sociologists, they could see that traditional religion was being exhausted; as sociologists also, they were inclined to believe that society could retain structure and coherence only on condition that a common faith bind together the members of the collectivity.

This problem, which I believe to be central, finds different expression in each writer. In the case of Durkheim, the expression is simple because Durkheim was a French profes-

sor of philosophy who belonged to the secular tradition and whose thinking was easily incorporated into that dialogue which I would not dare call eternal, but which is surely perennial, between the Catholic Church and secular thought, a dialogue which fills several centuries of French history. As a sociologist, Durkheim thought he observed that traditional religion no longer satisfied the exigencies of what he called the scientific spirit. At the same time, as a good disciple of Auguste Comte he considered that a society needs consensus and that consensus can be established only by absolute beliefs. From which he concluded—with what strikes me as professorial naïveté—that it was necessary to establish a morality inspired by the scientific spirit. The crisis of modern society seemed to him to have been created by the nonreplacement of traditional moralities based on religions by a morality based on science. Sociology was to help establish such a morality.

Pareto is also obsessed by the desire to be a scientist, and he is even tedious in his frequently repeated statement that only those propositions obtained by the logico-experimental method are scientific, and that all other propositions, especially those of a moral, metaphysical, or religious order, have no scientific value, no value as truth. But while he heaps inexhaustible irony on so-called scientific religion or scientific morality, Pareto is very much aware that it is not science which causes men to act. He even writes somewhere that if he thought his writings were going to be widely read he would not publish them. For, he said, one cannot explain by means of the logico-experimental method what the social order actually is without destroying its foundation. Society, he said, is held together only by feelings, which are not true but which are effective. If the sociologist shows people the wrong side of the embroidery or what goes on behind the scenes, he runs the risk of destroying indispensable illusions.

Pareto would have considered Durkheim's so-called scientific morality no more scientific than the morality of the catechism. He would even have been inclined to say, taking the idea to its conclusion, that it was appreciably less

scientific, since it committed the signal error of believing that it was scientific when it was not—not to mention the additional error of imagining that men might one day be persuaded to act upon scientific or rational considerations.

This is the contradiction peculiar to our sociologists; the contradiction between the need for scientific precision in the analysis of society and the conviction that scientific propositions cannot unite men, since the coherence and order of every society is always maintained by ultra-, infra- or supra-rational beliefs.

In Max Weber an analogous theme occurs, though expressed in different feelings. Modern society, as he describes it, tends toward an increasingly bureaucratic and rational organization. In this respect Max Weber's description somewhat resembles Tocqueville's. The more modernity prevails and extends its sphere, the more the anonymous, bureaucratic, rational element of organization will be enlarged. This rational organization is, as it were, the fate of modern societies. Max Weber accepts it. But, belonging to a profoundly religious family (although probably a nonbeliever himself), he retains a deeply felt respect for the religious faith possible in past ages, and contemplates the rationalizing transformation of modern societies with mixed emotions. He was determined to accept what is necessary to the society in which we live; he would have been horrified by merely nostalgic complaints against the world or history as they are. But at the same time he has no enthusiasm for the type of society which was developing before his eyes. Comparing the situation of modern man with that of the Puritans, who, according to him, played an important role in the formation of modern capitalism, Max Weber provides the formula so often quoted to characterize his attitude: "The Puritans wanted to be businessmen; we are condemned to it." Which is to say: *the businessman* in our day is condemned to fulfill a narrow social function within vast and anonymous groups, without the possibility of a total flowering of the personality which was conceivable in other ages.

Modern society is and will be bureaucratic and rational.

But Max Weber was afraid that a society of this type might serve to suppress what in his eyes made life worth living, that is, personal choice, awareness of responsibility, action, faith. Weber does not envision a scientific morality, like Durkheim; nor does he heap sarcasm upon the traditional sentiments or the "scientific religions," like Pareto. He is a member of rational society; he wants to conceive the nature of this society scientifically; but he believes that what is most vital, most valid in human existence lies beyond each man's confinement within professional activity and is defined by what today's fashionable vocabulary calls commitment.

Actually, if we apply to him concepts not current in his time, Max Weber, insofar as he was a philosopher at all, was an existential philosopher. One of the most celebrated existential philosophers of our day, Karl Jaspers, an intimate friend and disciple of Weber, has always referred to him as his master.

It can be seen that in their conception of sociological explanation, and in their interpretation of human conduct, Durkheim, Pareto, and Weber transcended both behaviorism and a strictly economic interpretation of human motivations. For their common conviction that societies are held together by collective beliefs prevents them from being satisfied with any explanation of behavior "from without," which would disregard what takes place in consciousness. At the same time, any effort to account for people's actions in terms of calculations of self-interest is immediately contradicted by recognition of the religious creeds as the major factor determining the order of all collectivities.

These three writers are unanimous in their rejection of external or materialist explanations, as well as of rationalizing and economic explanations, of human behavior. This explains why about a generation ago Professor Talcott Parsons wrote his important book on Durkheim, Pareto, and Weber (*The Structure of Social Action*), a book whose sole purpose was to show the affinity between these three systems of conceptual interpretation of human behavior. Parsons tried to demonstrate that, in their different lan-

guages, the three men actually conceived in related ways what might be called the "formal" structure of the sociological explanation of behavior. The origin of this formal similarity is, I think, the problem of science vs. religion, which is common to them. At least this is *one* reason for this formal similarity. There is, in fact, another possibility: It is that all three discovered a part of the true system of the explanation of behavior; and when writers meet in the truth, this meeting needs no other explanation. As Spinoza said, it is the fact of error which needs explanation, and not the discovery of truth.

But if the common theme of these writers is the relation between science and religion, or between reason and feeling, if all three engage in effect in a dialogue with one another, it is nonetheless true that the differences between them are in many respects striking.

Durkheim is a philosopher of the French university. He is a spiritual descendant of Auguste Comte, and his thinking also focuses on the necessity for social consensus. Moreover, as a Frenchman, the manner in which he formulated the problem of the relation between science and religion is certainly influenced by the intellectual climate of France at the end of the nineteenth century. It was a time when the nondenominational elementary school was seeking a morality different from religious morality; and this morality had first been found in a kind of Kantianism (itself a reflection of the Protestant spirit), and then discovered as a consequence of sociological thought.

Durkheim wrote three great books which mark his intellectual itinerary and which represent three variations on the fundamental theme of *consensus*. The first, *De la division du travail social*, may be reduced to the following theme: modern society implies an extreme differentiation of jobs and professions. How are we to ensure that a society divided among innumerable specialists will retain the necessary intellectual and moral coherence? Durkheim's second great book, *Le Suicide*, is an analysis of a phenomenon regarded as pathological, intended to shed light on the evil which threatens modern or industrial societies: *anomie*. The third

book is *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, whose purpose is to seek the essential characteristics of religious order at the dawn of human history, not out of curiosity about what might have happened thousands of years ago, but in order to rediscover in the simplest societies the essential secret of all human societies—in order to understand what the reform of modern societies requires in the light of primitive experience.

Pareto, on the other hand, is Italian, and his intellectual training is different. Originally he studied mathematics and physics; he took an engineering course; then he worked out a mathematical theory of economics; and gradually, with a growing desire to grasp concrete social reality, he discovered both the inadequacy of mathematical and economic formalism and the powerful role of emotions in human behavior.

Neither by education nor by temperament is he a philosopher like Durkheim. He is in no sense under the influence of Auguste Comte, whom he is inclined to regard with contempt. If he refers himself to an intellectual tradition, it is that of Machiavelli and Machiavellianism. In this respect, Machiavellianism might be defined as an attempt to see through the hypocrisies of the social comedy, to single out the true feelings that motivate men, to understand the true conflicts that make up the fabric of historical evolution, and consequently to provide a vision stripped of all illusion as to what *really* constitutes social life.

What determines Pareto's thought is, first, the conflict between the rationality of economic theories and the irrationality of human behavior. Next, it is the discovery that this behavior, though irrational in comparison with science, may be socially effective and useful.

It should also be remembered that Pareto is the son of a liberal Italian patriot of the generation of Italian unity.* He was brought up in an environment which believed in liberal and humanitarian ideas, and in the end he became convinced that these ideas are often dangerous for the

* But some historians believed that Pareto's father was already converted to "reactionary" ideas.

privileged minorities, the happy few, which support them so sincerely. Next he discovered, or believed he discovered, that faith in democracy, in socialism, in humanity is worth no more in comparison with logico-experimental thought than belief in God, the devil, or witches.

In Pareto's eyes, a humanitarian is just as much of a sentimentalist, a man who is moved by what he calls "residues," as a believer in tradition. He would have been inclined to regard Durkheim's democratic religion as not one ounce more scientific than traditional morality. With a little good will and psychoanalysis, some commentators have seen in Pareto a revolt against the humanitarian ideas either of his own youth or of the Italian milieu, or, if you will, an immense justification of the bitter disappointments which his observation of reality provided him.

Max Weber, the third of the three, is neither a philosopher nor an engineer by training, but a jurist and a historian. His university training was essentially legal. He even began a career as an administrator. He possessed exceptional historical erudition, as well as an itch for politics. He was never an active politician—that is, he was never a candidate for electoral office. He narrowly missed running for election after the German defeat in 1918, and then finally withdrew; but he always regretted not having been a man of action. He belongs to that breed of sociologists who are frustrated politicians.

Max Weber's methodology may be explained to a large extent in terms of the relation between science and action, or sociology and politics. He wants a neutral science, because he does not want the professor, in his chair, to use his prestige to impose his ideas. But he wants a neutral science which would at the same time be useful to the man of action, to politics.

As a consequence, Max Weber's historical vision is neither the progressive vision of Durkheim nor the cyclical vision of Pareto. His vision is closer to Tocqueville's: there is a fatal, inevitable element in modern societies; certain intrinsic characteristics of these societies—bureaucracy, rationalization—must be accepted; but these