

Sociological Theories

Sociologists depend on theories to help them explain the social world and organize their ideas about how it operates. A theory is the analysis and statement of how and why a set of facts relates to each other. In sociology, theories help us understand how social phenomena relate to each other. Theories help sociologists explain why and how society works. Through the use of theory, they work to answer such questions as “why are things as they are, what conditions produce them, and what conditions change them into something else? If we have such a theory, we will at last be in a position to know what we really can do about the shape of our society” (Collins 1988, 119). By understanding the real causes of how and why things operate as they do, we can find ways to address the things that need improvement. Sociologists use scientific research methods.

1. Classical Theory

The contemporary discipline of sociology is theoretically multi-paradigmatic as a result of the contentions of classical social theory. In Randall Collins' well-cited survey of sociological theory, he retroactively labels various theorists as belonging to four theoretical traditions: Functionalism, Conflict, Symbolic Interactionism, and Utilitarianism. Modern sociological theory descends predominately from functionalist (Durkheim) and conflict-centred (Marx and Weber) accounts of social structure, as well as the symbolic interactionist tradition consisting of micro-scale structural (Simmel) and pragmatist (Mead, Cooley) theories of social interaction. Utilitarianism, also known as Rational Choice or Social Exchange, although often associated with economics, is an established tradition within sociological theory. Lastly, as argued by Raewyn Connell, a tradition that is often forgotten is that of Social Darwinism, which brings the logic of Darwinian biological evolution and applies it to people and societies. This tradition often aligns with classical functionalism. It was the

dominant theoretical stance in American sociology from around 1881 to 1915 and is associated with several founders of sociology, primarily Herbert Spencer, Lester F. Ward and William Graham Sumner. Contemporary sociological theory retains traces of each of these traditions and they are no means mutually exclusive.

1. Functionalism

A broad historical paradigm in both sociology and anthropology, functionalism addresses the social structure, referred to as social organization in among the classical theorists, as a whole and regarding the necessary function of its constituent elements. A common analogy (popularized by Herbert Spencer) is to regard norms and institutions as 'organs' that work towards the proper-functioning of the entire 'body' of society. The perspective was implicit in the original sociological positivism of Comte but was theorized in full by Durkheim, again with respect to observable, structural laws. Functionalism also has an anthropological basis in the work of theorists such as Marcel Mauss, Bronisław Malinowski and Radcliffe-Brown. It is in Radcliffe-Brown's specific usage that the prefix 'structural' emerged. Classical functionalist theory is generally united by its tendency towards biological analogy and notions of social evolutionism, in that the basic form of society would increase in complexity and those forms of social organization that promoted solidarity would eventually overcome social disorganization. As Giddens states: "Functionalist thought, from Comte onwards, has looked particularly towards biology as the science providing the closest and most compatible model for social science. Biology has been taken to provide a guide to conceptualizing the structure and the function of social systems and to analyzing processes of evolution via mechanisms of adaptation. functionalism strongly emphasizes the pre-eminence of the social world over its individual parts (i.e., its constituent actors, human subjects)."

2. Conflict Theory

Functionalist theories emphasize "cohesive systems" and are often contrasted with "conflict theories", which critique the overarching socio-political system or emphasize the inequality between particular groups. The following quotes from Durkheim and Marx epitomize the political, as well as theoretical, disparities, between functionalist and conflict thought respectively:

To aim for a civilization beyond that made possible by the nexus of the surrounding environment will result in unloosing sickness into the very society we live in. Collective activity cannot be encouraged beyond the point set by the condition of the social organism without undermining health.

— Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society* 1893

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an uninterrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended, either in a revolutionary re-constitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

— Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* 1848

3. Symbolic Interaction

Symbolic interaction; often associated with Interactionism, Phenomenological sociology, Dramaturgy, Interpretivism, is a sociological tradition that places emphasis on subjective meanings and the empirical unfolding of social processes, generally accessed through micro-analysis. This tradition emerged in the Chicago School of the 1920s and 1930s, which prior to World War II "had been the center of sociological research and graduate study". The approach focuses on creating a framework for building a theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of individuals. Society is nothing more than the shared reality that people construct as they interact with one another. This approach sees people interacting in countless settings using symbolic

communications to accomplish the tasks at hand. Therefore, society is a complex, ever-changing mosaic of subjective meanings. Some critics of this approach argue that it only looks at what is happening in a particular social situation, and disregards the effects that culture, race or gender (i.e. social-historical structures) may have in that situation. Some important sociologists associated with this approach include Max Weber, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, George Homans and Peter Blau. It is also in this tradition that the radical-empirical approach of Ethnomethodology emerges from the work of Harold Garfinkel.

4. Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is often referred to as exchange theory or rational choice theory in the context of sociology. This tradition tends to privilege the agency of individual rational actors and assumes that within interactions individuals always seek to maximize their own self-interest. As argued by Josh Whitford, rational actors are assumed to have four basic elements, the individual has (1) "a knowledge of alternatives," (2) "a knowledge of, or beliefs about the consequences of the various alternatives," (3) "an ordering of preferences over outcomes," (4) "A decision rule, to select among the possible alternatives" Exchange theory is specifically attributed to the work of George C. Homans, Peter Blau and Richard Emerson. Organizational sociologists James G. March and Herbert A. Simon noted that an individual's rationality is bounded by the context or organizational setting. The utilitarian perspective in sociology was, most notably, revitalized in the late 20th century by the work of former ASA president James Coleman.

5. 20th-century social theory

Following the decline of theories of sociocultural evolution, in the United States, the interactionism of the Chicago School dominated American sociology. As Anselm Strauss describes, "We didn't think symbolic interaction was a perspective in sociology; we thought it was sociology." After World War II, mainstream sociology shifted to the survey-research of Paul Lazarsfeld at

Columbia University and the general theorizing of Pitirim Sorokin, followed by Talcott Parsons at Harvard University. Ultimately, "the failure of the Chicago, Columbia, and Wisconsin sociology departments to produce a significant number of graduate students interested in and committed to general theory in the years 1936–45 was to the advantage of the Harvard department." As Parsons began to dominate general theory, his work predominately referenced European sociology—almost entirely omitting citations of both the American tradition of sociocultural-evolution as well as pragmatism. In addition to Parsons' revision of the sociological canon (which included Marshall, Pareto, Weber and Durkheim), the lack of theoretical challenges from other departments nurtured the rise of the Parsonian structural-functionalist movement, which reached its crescendo in the 1950s, but by the 1960s was in rapid decline.

By the 1980s, most functionalisms in Europe had broadly been replaced by conflict-oriented approaches and to many in the discipline, functionalism was considered "as dead as a dodo." "According to Giddens, the orthodox consensus terminated in the late 1960s and 1970s as the middle ground shared by otherwise competing perspectives gave way and was replaced by a baffling variety of competing perspectives. This third 'generation' of social theory includes phenomenologically inspired approaches, critical theory, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, structuralism, post-structuralism, and theories written in the tradition of hermeneutics and ordinary language philosophy."

6. Pax Wisconsinana

While some conflict approaches also gained popularity in the United States, the mainstream of the discipline instead shifted to a variety of empirically oriented middle-range theories with no single overarching, or "grand", theoretical orientation. John Levi Martin refers to this "golden age of methodological unity and theoretical calm" as the Pax Wisconsinana, as it reflected the composition of the sociology department at the University of Wisconsin–Madison: numerous scholars working

on separate projects with little contention. Omar Lizardo describes the Pax Wisconsana as: "a Midwestern flavored, Mertonian resolution of the theory/method wars in which sociologists all agreed on at least two working hypotheses: grand theory' is a waste of time, and good theory has to be good to think with or goes in the trash bin." Despite the aversion to grand theory in the latter half of the 20th century, several new traditions have emerged that propose various syntheses: structuralism, post-structuralism, cultural sociology and systems theory.

7. Structuralism

❖ Anthony Giddens

The structuralist movement originated primarily from the work of Durkheim as interpreted by two European anthropologists. Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration draws on the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure and the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In this context, 'structure' refers not to 'social structure' but to the semiotic understanding of human culture as a system of signs. One may delineate four central tenets of structuralism: First, structure is what determines the structure of a whole. Second, structuralists believe that every system has a structure. Third, structuralists are interested in 'structural' laws that deal with coexistence rather than changes. Finally, structures are the 'real things' beneath the surface or the appearance of meaning.

The second tradition of structuralist thought, contemporaneous with Giddens, emerges from the American school of social network analysis, spearheaded by the Harvard Department of Social Relations led by Harrison White and his students in the 1970s and 1980s. This tradition of structuralist thought argues that, rather than semiotics, social structure is networks of patterned social relations. And, rather than Levi-Strauss, this school of thought draws on the notions of structure as theorized by Levi-Strauss' contemporary anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown. Some refer to this as "network structuralism," and equate it to "British structuralism" as opposed to the "French structuralism" of Levi-Strauss.

❖ **Post-structuralism**

Post-structuralist thought has tended to reject 'humanist' assumptions in the conduct of social theory. Michel Foucault provides a potent critique in his *Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, though Habermas and Rorty have both argued that Foucault merely replaces one such system of thought with another. The dialogue between these intellectuals highlights a trend in recent years for certain schools of sociology and philosophy to intersect. The anti-humanist position has been associated with "postmodernism", a term used in specific contexts to describe an era or phenomena, but occasionally construed as a method.

References

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