

Classical Sociological Theory: Introduction

A. The Classical Tradition

1. Role of wisdom
 - a. People are naturally unequal: some have more wisdom
2. Language is for finding wisdom and truth
3. After Christianity, leading role of Church in finding truth
4. Great chain of being
 - a. God, Church hierarchy, King, Aristocracy, Commoners
5. Society as a family or body (corporatism)
 - a. Head of society like a father
 - b. The different parts fit together and are (or should be) in harmony
 - c. The parts are organized in corporate structures, not individuals

B. The Individualist/Utilitarian Tradition

1. Hobbes and Social Contractarianism
 - a. State of Nature
 - 1) Individuals as atoms
 - 2) Individuals have complete sovereignty over themselves
 - 3) People motivated by desire/pride and fear of death: maximizing their utilities
 - 4) People are equal: all have desires; all fear death; all are mortal
 - a) Implicitly democratic
 - 5) War of every person against every other person

- 6) Condition of anarchy and strongest person winning; but strongest person must also fear
- 7) Denial that religion is effective in reducing fear
- 8) Problem of aristocratic pride
- b. Social Contract to build state and society
 - 1) Rational people will give up sovereignty to state
 - 2) Note prisoner's dilemma: rationality of social contract ineffective against aristocratic pride and religious zeal
2. Locke's moderation of this view
 - a. Society can create state
 - b. Right of revolution
 - c. Toleration
3. Adam Smith and the harmonization of individualism
 - a. Theory of Moral Sentiments
 - 1) "Sympathy" leads to comparison
 - 2) Comparison leads to striving
 - 3) Striving changes whole face of the globe
 - b. Wealth of Nations
 - 1) People are equal, but have different talents; have tendency to "truck, barter and exchange one thing for another"
 - 2) This leads, not to war, but to peaceful complementarity
 - 3) Market society as a social contract:
 - a) Feudal society as anarchy, state of nature, warfare, mafia turf-battle

- b) Market society as a pacified society
 - (i) Order and good government
 - (ii) An expanding pie displaces violent confrontation
 - c) The Invisible Hand
 - d) The night-watchman state
4. Bentham and Utilitarianism
- a. Motto: The greatest good for the greatest number
 - 1) Calculation of pleasures and pains
 - b. Based on the same atomism, egalitarianism, and self-interest as Hobbes
 - 1) Now explicitly democratic
 - 2) Maintains the same peaceful and harmonious orientation as Smith
 - c. Promoted Liberal reformism in England
 - 1) Reducing privilege
 - 2) Widening franchise
 - 3) Improving living and working conditions
 - 4) Supporting toleration
5. Criticisms of Utilitarianism
- a. Economics became institutionalized and separated
 - b. Socialists criticized atomism as leading to new forms of privilege and thus being undemocratic
 - c. Sociologists criticized atomism as empirically false
 - d. Psychologists criticized pleasure/pain calculations as simplistic (Pygmalion: Bentham “Pushpin as good as Poetry,” JS Mill, GB Shaw, My Fair Lady)
 - e. Moralists criticized isolation of atoms, loss of community, decline of altruism

6. By the period between the two world wars, Utilitarianism appeared to be dead, but since the 1950s, it has made a come-back in sociology
 - a. Homans and Exchange Theory
 - 1) Criticizes Parsons' reification of "society"
 - 2) Society is composed of people doing things for each other and thereby forming solidaristic bonds
 - 3) Blau shifted theory from emphasis on individual psychology to structures of interaction
 - 4) Note anomalies discovered from structural perspective
 - a) Arrow's impossibility theorem
 - b) Schelling's theories of "bandwagon effects" or "tipping"
 - b. Limits of Rationality
 - 1) March and Simon's "bounded rationality" and the problem of information overload: "satisficing" rather than maximization of utilities
 - 2) Mancur Olson's "free rider" problem
 - a) Marwell/Oliver's solution in field of social movements
 - 3) "Prisoner's dilemma" and game theory (recall Hobbes)
 - a) Iterated games as a possible solution: problem of information overload
 - c. Limits of Atomism in social structure
 - 1) Networks in markets: White and Granovetter
 - 2) Corporate actors as powerful actors in markets (Coleman)
 - 3) Coleman's theory of social capital

- 4) State as a social actor, not as a social contract: Tilly's theory of State as a protection racket or organized crime
- 5) Structural problems of democratic optimal solution
 - a) Polarization and Grand Coalitions block alternance
 - b) Minimum winning coalitions leaves out minority
 - c) Pivotal position can block/extort majority

C. The Conflict Tradition

1. Marxism: The intellectual background

a. Hegel's dialectic as a conflict theory

- 1) Thesis, antithesis, synthesis
- 2) But this was also a theory of harmonization under the Prussian State
- 3) Left Hegelians (including Marx) stressed the conflict aspect

b. Classical political economy and Materialism

- 1) Much of Marxism and conflict theory can be derived from Adam Smith and his followers
- 2) Material interests and class conflict are at the basis of social action and social structure
 - a) Values and ideology stem from economic roots
- 3) Analysis of social classes according to the means of production
 - a) Capitalists - owners of capital; live from profit
 - b) Workers - work for capital; live from wages
 - c) Landlords - monopoly owners of land; live from rent
- 4) Classes are necessarily in conflict with each other, and history is the history of class conflict
 - a) Implicit in classical political economy; explicit in Marx

2. Marxist Sociology and Conflict theory

a. Social classes based on the means of production (capital)

- 1) Society is bifurcating into two main social classes, capitalists and proletarians (owners and workers)
- 2) Middle classes are being squeezed out

- 3) Lumpenproletariat results from unemployment: incapacity of capital to employ all workers
 - 4) Due to capitalist competition and concentration, most people will increasingly belong to the proletariat
- b. Theory of Ideology
- 1) Ideas or values stem from material conditions: thus, one's ideas stem from one's class position
 - 2) The dominant ideas of any epoch are the ideas of the dominant class
 - a) The dominant class controls the means of disseminating ideas (e.g. news media, advertising)
 - b) The dominant class can afford to hire professional ideologists or intellectuals
 - 3) This theory can be generalized as a theory of class cultures or of group subcultures, if the group has its own material interests
- c. The theory of political conflict
- 1) The dominant class must control the State to protect its economic position and prevent subordinate classes from rebelling
 - 2) Politics is a struggle to control the State
 - a) The dominant class wins this struggle
 - b) A rising class sometimes overthrows and displaces an existing dominant class
 - c) The capitalist class overthrew the old aristocracy in the French revolution
 - d) The proletarian class will overthrow the capitalist class in a socialist revolution
 - e) The class that wins generally has superior material resources and superior organization (networks of ties, unlike the peasantry: a sack of potatoes)
 - (i) Theories of resource mobilization

- f) Capital as a sorcerer's apprentice
 - (i) Brings together and organizes workers for production
 - (ii) Workers use this organization to seize political power
 - (iii) However, this prediction did not come true because of economic decentralization
- 3) In practice, revolutions involve unstable coalitions among classes
 - a) The lower classes sometimes act as shock troops for higher classes
 - (i) They have false consciousness
 - (ii) They have less internal organization and can be led
 - b) Theory of Bonapartism
 - (i) Bourgeoisie cannot rule directly in a democracy because they are not a majority
 - (ii) Lumpenproletariat and peasantry must defeat proletariat for the bourgeoisie
 - (iii) Bourgeoisie must rule with a friendly dictator
- 3. Max Weber's multidimensional theory of stratification: Three bases instead of one
 - a. Class is defined more broadly than in Marx
 - 1) Relations to the means of production is one basis
 - 2) Market position is another basis
 - a) Skills and the theory of human capital
 - b) NB more recent theory of social capital
 - b. Status crosscuts class lines
 - 1) Basis of status is honor: abhors market higgling
 - 2) Also based in patterns of consumption

- c. Parties are pure competitors for power
 - 1) Basis is pure organization and adherence to the organization
 - a) May well cross class or status lines
 - b) May involve disloyalty to or betrayal of class or status interests: NB Michels' Iron Law of Oligarchy

D. The Functionalist Tradition

1. Durkheim's Problem of Social Order

- a. The question is, What holds society together; what is the nature of the social bond?
 - 1) It focuses on the ties between individuals, not on the individuals themselves
 - 2) It is a critique of the atomistic assumptions of Social Contract theory
 - a) There must be precontractual elements of contract
 - b) Otherwise, people will not uphold their agreements if they have the opportunity to cheat
- b. Social density or concentration is the key factor
 - 1) The less the social density, the greater the social homogeneity
 - 2) The greater the social density, the greater the social differentiation or specialization: the greater the division of labor
 - a) Durkheim assumes a social evolution from simple, sparsely populated, homogeneous societies to large, densely populated, complex and differentiated societies
 - b) Spencer takes a similar view of social evolution toward large, complex societies, but unlike Durkheim, he bases it on methodological individualism
 - 3) Problems of coordination of this division of labor lead to problems for individuals and society
 - a) Especially the problem of anomie (lack of regulation), but also:
 - b) Forced division of labor
 - c) Egoistic or altruistic suicide
- c. Social bonds are created and reinforced in rituals
 - 1) These are moments of heightened social density

- 2) The highest points of social density, moments of social effervescence, create rituals
- 3) Symbols and ideas represent the power of the social bonds, even when rituals are not taking place
 - a) Therefore symbols are revered, and their violation is tabooed
- d. The content of these social bonds is Morality, Values, Norms, Rules, Law
 - 1) Society punishes those who break these morals or laws - that is, those who violate the social bonds
2. American functionalism around the 1950s: Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons
 - a. This functionalism looked at the contribution of any phenomenon to society
 - b. These may be divided into manifest and latent functions
 - 1) Manifest functions are those that people consciously strive for
 - 2) Latent functions are those whose purpose may not immediately be apparent
 - a) E.g., an urban political machine that is corrupt but serves the interests of its patronage clients and thus keeps the lower classes attached to society
 - b) Of course, such latent functions can be analyzed in the conflict tradition simply as different group interests
 - 3) Occasionally, when the functionalist analyst cannot see any purpose for a phenomenon, it may be labeled a “dysfunction”
 - c. This functionalism was generally conservative because almost anything that existed was considered to be all for the best
 - 1) An extreme example of this conservatism was Davis and Moore’s theory of stratification that says higher paid people earn more because they contribute more to society
 - 2) Durkheim’s own functionalism was not so conservative because he could be critical of some things that exist

3. Some examples of the power of Social Symbols and Rituals from cultural sociology and social anthropology
 - a. Marcel Mauss's analysis of the symbolic features of the Gift
 - 1) The "kula ring" of gift giving in the Trobriand islands illustrates the precontractual elements of contract
 - a) The islanders trade two types of goods, economic goods like fish and coconuts, and symbolic money-like goods which travel around the islands in a ring
 - b) Only after the chieftains have given gifts of the money-like goods does economic trading take place. Prior to that, an air of (potential) hostility would make market negotiations dangerous
 - 2) Some gifts establish social hierarchy
 - a) The one who can afford to give the most expensive gifts is shown to hold the highest status
 - b) Potlach gift-giving among the Indians of the Canadian Pacific takes this form and can be very competitive
 - c) Some chieftains on South Sea islands receive gifts from the tribal members and then give them back at huge ceremonial feasts
 - (i) This may appear to be circular, but it demonstrates the power of the chieftain
 - b. Erving Goffman and Randall Collins on interaction rituals and class subcultures
 - 1) Goffman posits that everyday interactions are actually ritual performances
 - a) They create ideal images of the self, negotiate social ties, control others
 - b) Some are "frontstage" performances meant for public consumption
 - c) Others are "backstage" activity meant for the privacy of intimate relations

- 2) Collins divides society according to how many orders people give or take
 - a) Those who give lots of orders constitute the “official class,” who uphold the “frontstage” ideals and formalities of society
 - b) Those who take orders are alienated from the official frontstage and retreat to a “backstage” subculture

E. The Microinteractionist Tradition

1. Its greatest strength is the analysis of the Self and the immediate social situations it faces
 - a. Its analysis of macrosociology tends to be thin and rather naive
2. It is the most uniquely American of the major traditions: it was developed here, and most of its major proponents have been American
 - a. However, it has not necessarily been the strongest tradition in America; it simply hasn't been very strong elsewhere
3. Theoretical background
 - a. Pragmatism: the philosophy of Charles Pierce (also William James, John Dewey)
 - 1) Pierce criticized formal, deductive logic from the point of view of his new theory of "semiotics," the science of signs
 - 2) The mind does not directly apprehend objects; signs mediate
 - 3) Signs can include words/language, symbols, etc.
 - 4) Signs are necessarily social because each individual does not invent them
 - 5) These philosophers did not develop the sociological aspects of their insights very far
 - b. The sociology of Charles Horton Cooley
 - 1) Cooley begins with the observation that children often have imaginary playmates
 - 2) Cooley argues that also, for adults, there is no essential difference between real and imaginary persons because our perception of others is in our minds
 - 3) Thus, society is a mental phenomenon
 - 4) Cooley's idea of society was very benign and naive, excluding phenomena like domination or conflict, but it set the stage for further microsociological thinking

4. The microsociology of George Herbert Mead
 - a. Very similar to Adam Smith's theory in the Theory of Moral Sentiments
 - b. The Self is a reflexive entity because a person can be both a subject and also an object for himself/herself: an "I" and a "Me"
 - c. As children, we begin by imaginary role playing, and eventually acquire an idea of rules for games and rules for life
 - d. We apply these rules to others and to ourselves. In this sense, we both enforce and internalize the rules
 - e. As we grow older, we realize that these rules are created socially, interactively, by what Mead calls "the Generalized Other"
 - 1) The Generalized Other is the repository of social standards: rules, norms, values - but also language, signs and symbols (as with Pierce's Semiotics)
 - 2) The Generalized Other is also society, but it is not external to us because we are a component part of it
 - 3) Thus, we both internalize social standards, and we can also influence social standards
 - 4) The self is not completely determined from outside, but it has an element of freedom and initiative.
 - f. In this respect, society is a looking-glass world. We regard ourselves according to the standards of the Generalized Other, and we judge others according to these standards, which we internalize, but can also influence
 - g. And since we exist in different social situations (as child, parent, spouse, friend, employee, etc.), our Self is also divided into different roles, each of which may correspond to a somewhat different Generalized Other - i.e., into different sets of norms.

5. Mead's microsociology was developed in several different directions
 - a. Herbert Blumer's Symbolic Interactionism
 - 1) We constantly re-negotiate our social situation: in reality, it is very fluid and can change rapidly
 - 2) If social structures appear stable, it is because people keep re-negotiating their relations in the same way
 - 3) Part of this tradition has investigated deviant behavior (especially "victimless crimes" like prostitution, drug abuse) with sympathy for the underdog in society
 - b. Role theory
 - 1) Much more static investigation of the structure of interaction
 - 2) Different situations correspond to the different roles in which we act
6. Other branches of microsociology
 - a. Harold Garfinkel's Ethnomethodology
 - 1) Ethnomethodology stems from Husserl's philosophy and existentialism, which doubts reality much more radically than does Pierce's Pragmatism
 - a) We can't know reality for certain - though we wish we did - so we construct myths, conventional understandings, about the way the world works.
 - b) Ethnomethodology shows how easily these myths can be undermined
 - 2) The social world we perceive is a socially-constructed reality: a set of conventional roles, activities bundled together and labeled
 - 3) Social research must examine in detail the actual activities that make up some named role: the way, say, an astronomer or plumber actually goes about his or her work
 - a) By doing this, the researcher shows that the role of astronomer or plumber is actually a conventional justification of a set of activities, and not necessarily the overall role that those persons claim for it

- b) The social researcher is part of this world and must take his act of observing into account
- 4) This approach has been applied to an extremely detailed study of audio- and videotapes
- b. Erving Goffman
 - 1) Really, Goffman is more of a Durkheimian: he stresses social structure first, and subjective consciousness second
 - 2) Goffman criticizes ethnomethodologists and symbolic interactionists: why should we accept the actor's own definition of his situation rather than analyzing the "frame" (social context) within which he acts?
 - 3) Some frames are embedded in other frames, but actors are rarely confused about where they are. We can generally get easily to the core or primary frame.
 - a) The core or primary frame is the material world in the Durkheimian sense
 - 4) His analysis of speech acts is similar: we must investigate the underlying (material) social situation in which it takes place