

Founders of Sociology and Their Ideas

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We discussed Auguste Comte and his first steps toward creating the field of sociology. We will pick up where he left off and look at the work of several other contributing theorists. We will also examine the theories that came from their ideas.

Each of you has a way of explaining how the world works. If a friend stopped you on the street one day and asked “Why are things the way they are in the world?” You would have an answer. We each observe the world around us and attempt to explain it. Comte would be so proud! All the people we cover were doing that exact same thing – observing the world in which they lived and coming to some conclusions about how it worked. Each of them was human and made mistakes, but all have some points that are still valid today.

You will notice as you look at the list of early contributors to the field that there will not be many women mentioned. Harriet Martineau is one exception. Martineau grew up in England at a time when most women were not educated. Martineau’s family disagreed with that popular idea. She was able to be in a position when the time came to add to sociology in a way many women of her day could not. Martineau had one more barrier to get past, however. She suffered from severe hearing loss. In spite of this disability, Martineau’s career included writing and lecturing on the role of women in society and the abolition of slavery. This made her a controversial figure. Martineau read Comte’s six-volume work on Positivism. She agreed with his way of looking at the world and wanted to help spread his work. She translated the six volumes into English and edited them down to a two-volume set. This opened the door to a much wider audience for Comte’s thinking.

We discussed the impact of the Industrial Revolution as one factor that influenced the development of sociology. Two important theorists – Karl Marx and Max Weber (pronounced Vey-ber) – were heavily influenced by that revolution. Both were concerned with the changes in other areas of life created by the change in production of goods. Marx believed the Industrial Revolution changed the nature of work in such a way as to ensure the exploitation of the worker by the hands of the capitalists or owners of the means of production. Marx also held that the worker, whom he called the proletariat, would experience alienation as he became separated from the product of his labor. This alienation or feeling of detachment would filter over into other areas of life such as religion and family, making life meaningless for the individual. Due to this, Marx thought of capitalism as a problematic economic system. He thought a society’s economic system was the basis for everything else in the society, including family structure, religion, and community life. In a capitalistic system Marx believed ultimately the proletariat would develop an awareness of the truth of the situation. He called this awareness “class consciousness.” Marx said the class consciousness would lead the proletariat to stage a revolution to overthrow the capitalist system. The end result of that revolution would be a communal society where everyone shared equally in the products of labor.

Marx's ideas about capitalism and inequality led to the development of conflict theory. This is a macrosociological or "big picture" approach to the world. Conflict theory holds that the world revolves around struggles for scarce resources. Marx always thought of money as the scarce resource, but in some places it might be water. In this century, increasingly, the scarce resource is power. Who has it and who doesn't becomes the focus of many debates and much social activism.

When Max Weber observed the Industrial Revolution, he was concerned about the increasing intrusion of technology. Weber believed that the increase in science and technology had positive aspects, but also some potentially troubling trade-offs for society. Weber used the phrase "disenchantment of the world" to describe how faith and fantasy were being replaced by science and technology. As a simple example of this, think about how a child feels when they discover there is no Tooth Fairy. The biological fact of shedding baby teeth remains, but the enchanting aspect is gone.

Weber felt that increases in technology and the increasing emphasis on efficiency in manufacturing created by the Industrial Revolution were creating a society that was more and more rationalized. Rationalization is an increasing "sameness" in the name of efficiency. If you want to produce products quickly and efficiently, you need to make them all the same way every time. Weber could see this concept of sameness or repetition creeping into other areas of life.

According to Weber, an increase in rationalization led to a corresponding increase in bureaucracy. This was a potential problem since bureaucracies rely on policy instead of tradition in decision making and have an established hierarchy as part the way they function. In other words, bureaucracies depend on policy to operate rather than personal ideas and abilities. Weber believed bureaucracies created a society where the identity of the individual mattered less and less. This increasing anonymity was one more of the trade-offs created by rationalization.

Weber was writing around the turn of the 20th century. He could not at that time imagine fast food restaurants. However, they make an excellent example of a rationalized system. In fact, author George Ritzer, writing at the turn of the 21st century, took Weber's ideas and applied them to the fast food world in a book entitled "The McDonaldization of America." Think about how the characteristics of a fast food restaurant have filtered into other businesses. In our culture, we value speed of service over quality in more and more businesses.

Weber was an early influence on the development of a theory known as symbolic interactionism. Other theorists, such as George Herbert Mead would further develop this point of view. George Herbert Mead is the first American sociologist in our list. He was a long time professor at the School of Sociology at the University of Chicago. This Chicago School, as it is called, was the first sociology school in the United States and very quickly was a powerful influence within the field. Mead's approach to the world is quite different from the others in our list. We will address details of Mead's work in other chapters, but note that he is one of the contributors to symbolic interactionism. Rather than taking a macrosociological view of the world, Mead looked at small group interaction in a microsociological approach.

We use symbols such as spoken and written words, body language and spatial arrangement to communicate or interact with others. This interaction through the use of symbols leads to the creation

of social reality as we attach meaning to things and situations. A current example would be the use of the word “sweet.” Traditionally we have used the word sweet to describe how a food, such as a cake is sweet or how a kind a person is, as in “What a sweet little girl.” Now a teenager might describe his or her car as “sweet” or use the word “sweet” to show they were pleased with something, such as ‘That skateboard park is sweet.’ Obviously the car and the skateboard park have no taste and no behavior that could be called sweet and yet the usage of the word sweet as a descriptor of something pleasing is commonplace. How did that change occur – through interaction, according to symbolic interactionism. The social reality changed as first a few, then more and more people interacted with one another using a different connotation of the word.

We give meaning to inanimate objects. A ring is just a piece of jewelry, but a wedding ring is used as a symbol of love and commitment. Why do we use a ring to symbolize this relationship and not some other item? In some other cultures less technologically advanced than ours, a certain type of bone is inserted in the nasal septum to recognize a marriage. Is one right and the other wrong? According to this theory, the social reality of either of those items has been created through the interaction among the people who use them in this way.

Emile Durkheim was a French theorist who took a totally different approach to studying the world. So far, all the theorists have focused on the problems in society. Durkheim chose to study social cohesion, or what brings people together instead. Durkheim was interested in how the groups one belongs to connect them to others in ways that contribute to stability in society. For example, if people have the same religious beliefs, those beliefs will create a bond that will overshadow differences that exist between them such as race or income.

Durkheim’s work contributes to the development of functional theory. Like conflict theory, functional theory is macrosociological. However, functional theory focuses on cohesion, not conflict. Functional theory attempts to explain how stability and order are maintained in society. Functional theory takes the approach that if something exists in your social system currently, you should not attempt to eliminate it since that would create imbalance. Crime, for example, would seem to be something that would create imbalance, but functional theory will point out how criminal incidents often bring communities together. In that way, crime has a function in society. Maintaining the status quo is important to functional theory.

Women were not the only ones excluded from sociology in its early days. People of color faced similar barriers to inclusion. As was true of women, few minority group members were educated in the 1800s in Europe or the U.S. For those who were educated to a level that would enable them to participate in a serious evaluation of society, the doors to recognition of work and inclusion in development of the field were closed in institutions such as the Chicago School. It was left to them to find their own way into sociology. One of those who did was W.E.B. DuBois.

DuBois was the first African American to graduate from Harvard with a doctoral degree. After Harvard, he traveled to Germany to study under Max Weber. He obtained the best education possible for a fledgling sociologist. When he returned to the United States, he taught at a small African-American

college, Wilberforce, until he was called to Philadelphia to conduct one of – if not the – first studies of urban life. He lived in an African-American neighborhood for two years, collecting information and observing the daily lives of the residents. His research was published in a book entitled “The Philadelphia Negro.” It is for this work that he is now considered the father of urban sociology. He went on to found the second sociology school in the United States at Atlanta University, where he was a faculty member. DuBois became a co-founder of the NAACP in 1909 and wrote numerous works on race and race relations. He is quoted as having stated “the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line.” Not surprisingly his ideas about inequality are closer to those of Marx than any other theorist in our list.

Do not make the assumption that sociology was developed long ago and has never changed since then. While each theorist of the past left his or her mark on the field, practicing sociologists of today are constantly re-evaluating the classic theories and creating new ones of their own.

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