



Edited by Craig Calhoun, Joseph Gerteis,  
James Moody, Steven Pfaff, and Indermohan Virk

# CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY FOURTH EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

# **Classical Sociological Theory**

**Fourth Edition**

**Edited by**

**Craig Calhoun, Joseph Gerteis, James Moody, Steven Pfaff,  
and Indermohan Virk**

**WILEY Blackwell**

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## Notes on the Editors

**Craig Calhoun** is University Professor of Social Sciences at Arizona State University. He was previously Director of the London School of Economics, President of the Social Science Research Council, and a professor of sociology at NYU, Columbia, and UNC Chapel Hill. Calhoun's newest book is *Degenerations of Democracy* (Harvard 2022) with Dilip Gaonkar and Charles Taylor.

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# Introduction

Classical sociological theory shapes the discipline of sociology, but also all of modern social thought. It influences politics, economics, and legal decisions. Preachers refer to it in sermons, journalists in newspaper columns. It shapes how both experts and ordinary people think about race, gender, sexuality, family, community, nationalism, military service, business corporations, social movements, and response to emergencies. It enables us to see connections among different events, institutions, and trends. It helps us to see general patterns in social life. And it helps us relate personal life to society. This is important at all scales from interpersonal relations like love or friendship to large-scale patterns in economy, government, or culture.

Sociological theory helps us to see to what extent we can choose the conditions we live under. It helps us literally to judge what is possible and what is not, and what are the likely consequences of different courses of action.

Sociological theory does not tell us what parties to vote for, what religion to profess – if any – or what moral values are right. But it does enable us to make systematic and informed judgments about what policies will promote our values and which will be likely to undermine them. It helps us to locate our personal experiences and shared projects in larger social and historical contexts. As C. Wright Mills put it: “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.”<sup>1</sup>

## The Idea of ‘Classical’ Theory



Examining classical sociological theory is not the same as looking for the 'founders' of sociology.<sup>2</sup> August Comte gave the new discipline its name; Herbert Spencer introduced core ideas of structure, function, and social evolution; Lester Frank Ward helped introduced the new field in the United States; and Robert Park and Albion Small create a disciplinary home at the University of Chicago. They shaped the field. But today their work is read mainly to see its historical importance, not its theoretical significance for current research. This is different for classical theorists like Karl Marx, Max Weber, and W.E.B. Du Bois. Their work not only helped to create sociology; it also informs and stimulates new sociology today.

The demarcation between "classical" and "contemporary" sociological theory continually shifts. In the 1930s, for example, the great American sociological theorist Talcott Parsons set out to synthesize what he regarded as crucial in the "classical" tradition. In his view, Max Weber and Emile Durkheim were the most important classics. Each wrote during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Parsons saw himself as continuing work they had started. Part of what made them classical was precisely the continuing importance their work had for such later analyses. At the time, Parsons saw himself as the new kid on the block, an innovator in his contemporary scene. He continued to produce influential original work until his death in 1979. Today, however, *his* work seems "classical".

Calling work "classical" means, first of all, that it has stood the test of time and is still significant. It is the opposite of "best forgotten". 'Classical' does not just mean old, therefore, but enduringly influential. In this sense, Parsons surely aspired to have his work become classical. As Jürgen Habermas sums up, "A tradition draws its binding force above all from the intellectual authority of works that claim classical standing against the maelstrom of criticism and

forgetting; a classic is that from which later generations can still learn.”<sup>3</sup>

Second, classics are models. Classical theories exemplify what it means to think deeply and creatively about society. There are no simple right or wrong answers to questions like whether society is more a matter of conflict or cooperation, a product of individual choices or a constraint on individuals, held together by power or markets or culture. Of course, they all matter. But how much each matters – and in what ways – must be considered over and over again in different contexts, with different facts, addressing different practical problems. Classical theories offer models for how to integrate empirical research, philosophy, and history in considering each. Classical theories also set intellectual standards.

Third, work we call classical tends to define broad orientations in the field of sociology. Reference to classical sociological theory is used to signal analytic approaches; it offers signposts to guide readers in seeing the intellectual heritage on which new theorists are drawing. Reference to Parsons signals, for example, a concern for “functionalist” approaches to questions of social integration, that is for understanding different social institutions and practices in terms of how they contribute to the successful workings of the whole society. Reference to Marx signals emphasis on class inequality and contradictions in society rather than smooth functioning.

Fourth, we term work “classical” when we acknowledge that there have been major new developments since it was written. This doesn’t mean that the “classical” work has been superseded. What it means is that new perspectives and debates have been introduced to which the classical social theorist has not been able to respond. In Parsons’ case, a variety of new ideas and arguments began to come

to the fore in and after the 1960s. Some of these were directly criticisms of or challenges to Parsons' functionalism, often for exaggerating harmony at the expense of power. He did respond to many, defending his perspective most of the time but also modifying it where he saw potential for improvement. Other parts of the new work, however, represented approaches that Parsons didn't consider – just as Parsons himself had integrated Weber and Durkheim into a new theory. Jürgen Habermas, for example, combined some of Parsons' concerns with Marxism, critical theory, and symbolic interactionism in a way that Parsons had never anticipated.<sup>4</sup> Jeffrey Alexander developed “neofunctionalism” that not only built on Parsons and Durkheim, but shifted the emphases in much more cultural directions, away from the sides of their work that emphasized economic organization and social institutions, and away from strong presumptions of value consensus.<sup>5</sup> Classical theory still matters, thus, but we see it in new ways based on new ideas and interests.

To understand classical social theory requires paying attention to its distinctive historical contexts (and also informs us about them). Harriet Martineau and Alexis de Tocqueville wrote about democracy in America when it was new. Weber wrote about political legitimacy before Germany had become democratic. Karl Mannheim wrote about ideology and utopia in the context of growing struggles between fascism and communism. In fact, all theory needs to be understood in historical context – we need to know the history of our own time – but part of what we mean when we identify certain theories as “contemporary” is that we share the same broad historical situation with their authors. This doesn't mean that there are no differences among us: today's historical context feels different in China, the former Soviet Union, Africa and the US.

Which classics seem important shifts as our contemporary interests change. This book is organized around a core set of ideas and issues that helped shape sociology and the understanding of modern society between the 18th Century and the 1960s. There were earlier precursors, and some theory from the 1960s and 70s seems more contemporary than classical. But the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries were crucial to forming 'modern society' and shaping sociology. Our companion volume, *Contemporary Sociological Theory*, shows how more recent thinkers have grappled with continuing issues from the earlier period and used both classical theory and new theory to engage a new wave of transformations shaping our contemporary world.

Classical sociological theory was overwhelmingly developed in Europe and North America, and mostly by white men of the middle and upper classes. These origins left marks. Like others in their societies, the white men sometimes failed to fully appreciate the contributions of female and Black theorists – and failed to do justice to the importance of gender, sexuality, sexism or heteronormativity, or of race and racism. The Europeans were sometimes blind to the implications of colonization. The Americans were often fascinated by the societies of the continents' First Peoples, but seldom did much to address their displacement or abuse.

There were classical sociological theorists who recognized and addressed many of these problems. Harriet Martineau analyzed the contradictions of slavery and exclusion of women in her *Society in America* at about the same time that Alexis de Tocqueville mostly passed over them in his better-known *Democracy in America*. While some of sociology's white men rightly praised her account, overall, she like many other women, was relatively neglected by the professors who shaped the discipline's self-understanding.<sup>6</sup> Even more remarkably, Jane Addams was a pioneer in