



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

CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY FOURTH EDITION

WILEY Blackwell

Classical Sociological Theory

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Fourth Edition

Edited by

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

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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.”¹

The Idea of ‘Classical’ Theory

Examining classical sociological theory is not the same as looking for the ‘founders’ of sociology.² 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.”³

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.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ Even more remarkably, Jane Addams was a pioneer in American sociology, teaching in the University of Chicago and publishing in the *American Journal of Sociology* as the discipline was first

institutionalized in the US. She drew on sociology as well as her work with immigrants to help found the field of social work.⁷ Perhaps most remarkably, the great Black sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois was not just neglected but actively excluded from sociology.⁸ His work *should* have shaped ‘mainstream’ sociology more than it did. This has left ‘unfinished business’ on race above all, but also on cities and colonialism. Innovation in contemporary sociological theory is based partly on recovering neglected voices or themes or arguments from classical sociological theory.

It is not accidental that Martineau and Addams were women, and Du Bois was Black. Correction of biases and blind spots has been driven by inclusion of women and people of color (and indeed, sociology has been among the most inclusive of all academic disciplines). Likewise, sociological theory has been improved by perspectives rooted in the postcolonies of the global South, in the communist and then formerly communist countries, and writing from non-Western civilizational histories.

New research is still shaped by the questions classical theorists asked and their strategies for answering them are still helpful. Du Bois, offers a powerful example. He worked to integrate analysis of racial domination into a perspective also shaped by his fellow classical theorists Max Weber and Karl Marx. He argued, for example, that we should not think in terms of race vs class but of their deep relationship, that experiencing racial domination and nationality produced ‘double-consciousness’, and that basic social trends like urbanization could not be understood apart from the racial and ethnic organization of cities. He helped to create a perspective later sociologists called ‘intersectionality’ – thinking in terms of ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or.’⁹

As the work of Du Bois demonstrates, improvement in sociological theory is not just a matter of representation or inclusion. It is innovation, which is constant not only because of faults discovered in older work, but also because society changes, research produces new or more precise empirical evidence, and because theorists develop powerful new ideas. Du Bois’ work is relevant to sociological theory in general, not just theories of race. Likewise, Martineau’s and Addams’ work is relevant beyond questions of gender.

Continuing the work of theoretical innovation is important today. This is why there is a companion volume on ‘contemporary’ theory. New theory is not only guided by classical theory, but strengthened by engaging it, becoming part of the enduring intellectual project it initiated.

From Social Thought to Sociological Theory

Sociological theory is a relatively new project, developed as part of modern science. But it is closely connected to a long history of social thought, extending back to the ancient world and part of every civilization. In the West, Greek philosophers, Roman lawyers, and Jewish and Christian religious scholars all contributed significantly to the “prehistory” of sociological theory. They thought about what made society, how it changed, what rulers – or parents – should and shouldn’t do, and what caused social order sometimes to collapse. The Jewish Torah and Talmud include social thought expressed in rules, narratives, and analytic reflections. The Christian Bible engages in social thought with accounts of marriage and family, communities based on love, and ‘rendering unto Caesar that which is Caesar’s’.

Social thought is also prominent in the Koran and flourished in the Muslim empires that reached from what are now Spain, Syria and Persia through Northern Africa, Mughal India, and along the coasts of Asia. Likewise, social thought was highly developed in the China's Confucian tradition – which emphasized harmonious integration – and in its 'Legalist' adversary – which emphasized strategic use of power. Social thought is important to Buddhist traditions that spread from India across Asia and to Hinduism's Vedic narratives. Most of what we know about all this earlier social thought comes from surviving texts. But social thought was also embedded in thinking about kinship, clans, ancestors, and how to resolve disputes among peoples with little or no writing, whether in Africa, the Americas, or Europe.

In short, thinking about social relations, change, culture, or power is not unique to the modern Western experience that generated sociology. All the world's civilizations can – and do – contribute to sociology and to sociological theory. Indeed, there are important criticisms of Western sociological and significant alternative versions from postcolonial and other non-Western thinkers. Within every tradition there are efforts to think beyond the contexts of its origins.

But for all the diverse anticipations of sociological theory, and all its continued transformations, it was formed crucially between the 18th and mid-20th centuries as European and North American societies grappled with the challenges of the era they called modernity. The scientific revolution made it possible. But the project of specifically sociological theory seemed *needed* because of rapid and unsettling change in social organization, social psychology, culture, and the relation of politics and economics to each of these. We look first at how science shaped the distinction of sociological theory from social thought in general, and in the next section at the issues that became its enduring central themes.

Science: The rise of science transformed the ways in which people understood the conditions of their own lives and relationships as well as the ways they understood astronomy or gravity. At the most general level, and aside from any of its specific discoveries or theories, the scientific revolution centered in 17th-century Europe brought an emphasis on new learning. That is, researchers set out to gather as much knowledge as possible and especially as much empirical knowledge as possible, and to organize it as systematically as possible. Correspondingly, they relied less on tradition. Modern science not only added to knowledge, but also subjected it to questioning and tests.

When early scientists stressed the importance of logic and rational thought on the one hand and empirical evidence on the other, they meant specifically to challenge the notion that we should simply believe what we are taught. They meant that even the most respected authorities and the most venerated traditions could sometimes be wrong. From Galileo to Darwin, this brought controversy with the defenders of established views.

As Robert Merton showed in the 1930s, science depends on a normative order.¹⁰ It is not perfectly free of values, but rather constituted by commitment to specifically scientific values – like the pursuit of truth. Scientists must not be driven primarily by personal gain, must not be subordinated to political power, and must demonstrate 'organized skepticism'. The starting points of science are to think for oneself, in the most rigorous way possible, and to trust the evidence of one's senses, especially when it is rooted in experiment or careful, systematic observation rather than casual everyday experience. In addition, science

seeks to discern logical order in enormously complex and always incomplete collections of facts.

This is something different from simply offering a summary of established facts. Sociological theories must integrate empirical observations into coherent logical structures explaining patterns of relationship. Think of the difference between stating the price of some object and saying prices are determined by supply and demand. Then add to the picture the way luxury goods gain higher prices by their connection to social status.

Facts always require interpretation – figuring out what they mean in relation to different questions or arguments. Making interpretation systematic is one of the main tasks of theory. Sociological theories must offer empirical claims that can be the basis of either tests (and thereby confirmation, correction, or improvement) or comparisons among theories (and thereby judgment as to which more accurately grasps social reality).

Science advances not just by an accumulation of facts, but through a process the philosopher of science Karl Popper called “conjecture and refutation.”¹¹ That is, a scientist (or someone else) puts forward propositions about how the world works; these are initially conjectures, products of imagination as well as knowledge. They become the basis for hypotheses, and research and analysis confirm or reject them. Thinking about what might explain the facts we see always requires imagination (as C. Wright Mills famously pointed out). But refutation drives the development of knowledge forward as much as imagination. Refutation can be very specific and detailed or much more theoretically basic – like challenging the view that the world is flat or that short term self-interest explains all human behavior. Refutation of an important hypothesis demands rethinking of the whole pattern of knowledge that is organized by a theory. Accordingly, some theorists may resist, even when others think the evidence is clear.

Empirical research also depends on theory to specify the objects of its analysis: how do we know what constitutes a community, for example, or a religion? Appealing to common sense doesn’t solve the problem. Common sense is generally formed on the basis of a particular religion or a particular experience of community – and this is a source of bias if one is seeking knowledge of religion or community in general, in all social contexts. More strikingly, an enormous amount of research has been done on ‘citizens’ and indeed ‘human beings’ by looking only at men – and often white men and European-American men. Theorists like Martineau and Du Bois showed how much this obscured, though it sometimes took white male sociological researchers a long time to pay enough attention.

In its blindness towards gender and race, empirical sociology often tacitly incorporated the assumptions of contemporary society. The founders of the US were not troubled by excluding women from voting because of a general sense that their roles were private not public. They tolerated slavery as a political compromise but also out of racial bias. In both cases, they accepted traditional, inherited ideas as true – just like those who doubted the existence of gravity before Galileo. It is a critical theoretical task to challenge received ideas. This is often pushed these tendencies just as it was a task of social movements to demand political recognition and rights.

Theoretical concepts are like lenses that enable us to see phenomena. Take the concept “self-fulfilling prophecy,” developed by the American sociologist Robert Merton in the mid-20th century.⁵ This calls our attention to a common aspect of human actions that may take place in many different contexts and which we wouldn’t otherwise relate to each

other. Aided by the concept, we can easily see the commonality among teachers' predictions of students' future success or failure in school, the labeling of criminals (who then find it hard to get legitimate jobs), and the comments of famous securities analysts on TV about what stocks are likely to go up or down. In none of these cases is the outcome of the predictions independent of the predictions themselves.

In short, sociological theory integrated social thought into social science. It aimed not only to be logically clear but also empirically grounded. However, it remained a question how fully social science could match natural or physical science in testing empirical claims with experiments or formalizing logic in mathematical models. There was no question that *some* questions about human beings could be approached this way, but could all? First, classical sociological theorists like Max Weber argued that because human beings were creators of meanings, and based their actions on these meanings, not just objective facts, sociology needed to include a method of sympathetic interpretation (*verstehen*). Second, other classical sociological theorists, such as Karl Polanyi, Max Horkheimer, and Theodore Adorno, argued that attempts at perfectly objective accounts of social life usually disguised biases built into the perspectives of the theorists. Polanyi's example was classical liberal economists who claimed to study universal economic laws were doubly biased. Relations they thought universal – like owning property – were in fact historically produced and different in different settings. Moreover, their analyses were shaped by sympathy for capitalists with property not workers without.

Sociological theories may consider non-social causes for social patterns – like climate or physical geography. But sociological theories on social causes as well as social effects. For example, a biological theory of infection will stress the way viruses reproduce, mutate, and affect host organisms. A sociological theory will analyze the patterns that explain who gets exposed – such as social networks or differences in occupation – who is most vulnerable, and who gets treatment.

Theorists develop concepts with which to grasp social life, identifying patterns in social relations and social action, produce explanations for both specific features of life in society and changes in overall forms of society. They also debate the inconsistencies between different proposed explanations. Theory is thus an indispensable part of sociology, crucial to its standing as a science.

Modernity and the Great Transformation

Science was one factor that made modern society new and different. This meant first of all different from Europe's immediately preceding history, the 'middle ages' understood to have come between the fall of the Western Roman Empire (roughly during the 5th century) and the beginnings of modernity in the Renaissance (mostly 15th and 16th centuries). It meant different secondarily from Classical Greece, Rome, Egypt, and other ancient societies that had flourished around the Mediterranean Sea. And it meant different, third, from the other great civilizations of which Europeans became aware through explorations (and eventually trade and religious missions) launched during the Renaissance. Looking at these three contrasts helped theorists clarify not just what was modern, but what was social. We can see them at work in the development of core themes for classical sociological

theory, each of which also reflected how sociological theory was differentiated from work in other emerging social science disciplines.

States. Nested hierarchies of political power and religious authority were central to the Middle Ages. This meant not just that some were ranked higher than others, but that structures of personal authority shaped who fit into recognized groups. Kings did not rule peasants directly. They ruled noble lords who ruled lesser lords, knights, and squires. Their authority only reached the peasants through layers, and at each level, the authority of lords only extended through specific territories.

Medieval kings often claimed to rule by divine right. Legitimate inheritance from the previous king was crucial. Modernity saw a demand to rethink legitimacy, with more emphasis on how well governments served the people in their societies. Politics was reorganized, with classical theorists engaged in trying to shape the outcomes as well as understand the process. Three kinds of political change were crucial:

First, the personal power of individual rulers was increasingly augmented (and eventually replaced) by the rise of state administrative capacity. This took place in an era of repeated wars fought partly over religion and partly to try to consolidate territorial power. Waging war was not just a matter of heroism in battle or having more soldiers than an enemy. It depended on the capacity to manufacture weapons, move troops (and feed and pay them), and increasingly to build ships – which in turn meant harvesting trees in inland forests and getting them to coastal shipyards. Military administration helped advance civilian administration as states took over issuing money, building roads, and eventually old age pensions, health care, and education.

Projects of state administration led to the development of bureaucracy – a term coined by the classical sociological theorist Max Weber (excerpted here) who pioneered its study. This wasn't all new. Bureaucracy was pioneered in the Chinese Empire, but it grew dramatically in modern nation-states. This meant rationalizing government, using civil servants forbidden to have other jobs (and thus conflicts of interest) and hiring and promoting them on the basis of their skills (rather than their families or political connections). The expanding role of government also reflected social demands, as businesses demanded better money and better roads, and workers demanded pensions, health care, and education. Expecting more of government produced calls to make government accountable.

Second, political power was increasingly organized in terms of nation-states. Wars of religion both reflected and advanced the change. They were projects of trying to produce uniformity among all the inhabitants of a country – all Catholics, say, or all Protestants. Such projects didn't stop with religion. The idea of nation transformed how modern people thought of culture – not just as elite taste but as a whole way of life. The idea of nation gained material substance with the standardization of national languages in place of local dialects, public education, and infrastructures for shared communication.

Medieval kings could give away a whole region in a marriage or inherit a foreign country where they didn't even speak the language. Frontiers were vague. Modern nation-states emphasized more or less unified populations with clear territories and borders. Domestic integration contrasted with external conflict and, as in the case of colonies, domination.

National integration was accompanied by a new sense that society mattered. For kings and emperors, ordinary people could be a problem or a resource, but they were

seldom a basic value. Indeed, kings and emperors often ruled over collections of societies – the different peoples who lived on the territories they conquered, each with a distinct way of life. Ordinary people didn't really count in politics. Kings thought of them as potential soldiers, but not citizens. At most, there were efforts to make sure their minimal subsistence needs were met – partly out of moral obligation, partly to avoid crime or rebellion.

Third, during the modern era demands grew for wider political participation. These came first of all from elites. Both landowners and merchants with new wealth resisted being dominated by kings. But at the same time there was pressure 'from below'. This came in part because ordinary people were organizing themselves in new ways. Small businesses also grew more numerous (and sometimes bigger). Farmers more often owned the land they worked. Craft societies expanded, including more workers. Education became more widespread. So did practical experience in self-government in a host of different organizations from local churches and schools to burial and charity societies.

The idea of 'consent of the governed' had powerful appeal to people who thought of themselves as independent citizens capable of making choices about the societies in which they lived. Social contract theory drew on this sensibility, and also on Biblical understandings that God created human beings as free individuals. Thomas Hobbes (excerpted here) suggested that originally free people were likely to discover that by themselves they were vulnerable to theft or even murder. Life in a state of nature might be free, but it would turn out to be "nasty, brutish, and short." People might therefore give up some freedom in exchange for security. His theory pioneered a recurrent effort to understand society in terms of the choices of self-interested individuals. But it is no accident that Hobbes focused on property. His approach to individuals stressed their capacity to possess more than their capacity to express creativity.¹²

By contrast, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (also excerpted here) held that private property was the enemy of freedom as well as equality. He used social contract theory to argue that those who had given consent to government could withdraw it. Like many of those who shaped early modern society, Rousseau admired the Roman Republic as an example of virtuous self-rule, lost with the transition to empire. They built on Renaissance experiments with self-governing city-states, constituted a radical wing to the 17th Century English Revolution, and were more successful in the American and then the French Revolutions of the 18th Century.

Alexis de Tocqueville and others in this tradition sought social foundations for democracy in 'civil society'. This meant society that was a free product of relations among private persons. Contract was a model for those relations, but not the only one. Friendship, religious community, and the self-governance of medieval guilds and cities also offered models. Tocqueville emphasized the importance of autonomous local communities and communications media able to reach larger scale publics. He helped classical sociological theory recognize how much of human life was organized at a level between the interior privacy of intimate family life (or indeed, the inner personality of the individual) and the exterior direction of the state. Society was the crucial middle ground in which relationships could not be explained entirely by psychology, politics or economics.¹³ Knitting together national societies strengthened democracy's social foundations and efforts like social security to support the welfare of all citizens. Sociologists have both celebrated success

(Durkheim and Parsons) and analyzed shortcomings (Durkheim again, along with Polanyi, Horkheimer and Adorno, and Mannheim).

Political participation is not just a matter of formal electoral processes, thus, but also of civil society organizations and social movements. For example, the US Constitution of 1789 excluded women and slaves, and allowed states to exclude working men who did not own enough property. This was not only unjust, but as Martineau emphasized, a contradiction within seemingly liberal democracy. It called for action and change. Centuries of social movements have struggled to extend democracy to all citizens – and often to increase equality. Movements exemplify the modern idea of people seeking to choose their ways of living in society together.

Revolutions could be celebrated as extreme examples of citizen choice about what kind of government to share. But revolutions also raised two troubling issues. First, there was always the possibility that a new government would be as bad as the old, and that ordinary people who supported the revolution would be excluded from control of the new government. The example of the Russian Revolution was widely seen to demonstrate this. Classical sociological theorists suggested that part of the issue was the power of underlying social conditions that might not support democracy even if most people wanted it.¹⁴ Robert Merton (excerpted here) generalized one dimension of this by pointing out how manifest functions – what seemed to be going on – might contrast with underlying, latent functions. The police might be intended to guarantee security, but instead guarantee property or privilege of some at the expense of the security of others. The revolution might be intended to increase freedom but by tearing down old systems of authority have the latent function of enabling new elites to take power.

This raised the second issue. While peaceful revolutions were theoretically possible, actual revolutions tend to involve violence. The French Revolution started in 1789 but by 1793–4 have become exceptionally bloody. Thousands were killed by the supposedly human guillotine. Many of those killed were themselves revolutionaries, not monarchists, but condemned by other factions of the revolutionary government. The issue has persisted as groups struggling against injustice or abusive governments question whether these can be changed by peaceful means. There is a tradition arguing that violence can be positive, even purifying. The classical sociological theorist Hannah Arendt (excerpted here) argued forcefully against this. Violence should ever be used to resolve political questions, she said, these always needed to be approached as matters of human action, including communication and debate.

Economies. Through much of history, production was mostly for the subsistence of those who produced it. Food was the dominant good, though craft products became increasingly important. With sedentary agriculture larger surpluses were produced – and mostly extracted to feed people in growing cities and support rulers in projects from majestic mausoleums to wars. Trade was initially as much a matter of ritual as material redistribution. Eventually, though, it linked cities and regions and flowed along some very long-distance routes. There was more wealth, more luxury consumption – like fine fabrics or elegant jewelry. But there was not any idea of *the* economy – as distinct from wealthier cities or rulers or indeed temples – and the political or military capacity to defend them.

The very idea of '*the* economy' is modern. The word comes from the ancient Greek term for household management. It was extended to thinking about other and larger enterprises.

But the modern idea of *'the economy'* is a significant departure. It refers not just to decisions about investment and consumption, but about an overall *system* of relationships – buying and selling, of course, but also borrowing and lending, investing and management. These are increasingly organized in an impersonal credit and monetary system and through corporations in which management is a job separate from ownership – and owners can be other corporations, further abstracting away from individuals.

A key feature of the modern era has been the attempt to separate economics from politics. Weber called them different *'value spheres'* – reflecting among other things the contrast between pursuit of the public good and pursuit of profit. One of the ideas of liberalism has been the notion that to protect freedom in each sphere, they should be free from each other. This is different from, say, a feudal system in which economic exploitation and political domination are organized directly by the same system of power and authority. Adam Smith thought government *'interference'* in the economy could upset its *'natural'* self-regulation. Karl Marx and Karl Polanyi both disagreed, holding that it was mistaken to think of the economy as natural rather than historically produced.

Classical economists formulated the idea of universal, natural economic laws in a 19th Century argument against state efforts to control export and import prices. The timing was surprising. In precisely the same period, the social impact of industrialization was so dramatic that observers called it *'industrial revolution'* and classical sociologists showed that it changed society as much as political revolutions.¹⁵ Agriculture was industrialized first, leading to the decline of rural villages and the rise of cities.

Modern markets are vastly larger than earlier ones, and organize a much larger proportion of human activities. Modern society doesn't simply have markets, as kingdoms, empires, and feudal societies elsewhere have had markets. It is structured in a basic way by markets. Moreover, continuous marketization has meant that activities previously organized in other ways have been reorganized on market bases – like paying for a nursing home rather than caring for aged parents at home. Of course, states could also provide care on a non-market basis, but the dominant trend has been *'commodification'*, the organization of production and provision as for monetized exchange. Property that was previously passed on through generations, like family farms, has been commodified.

The discipline of economics developed to understand this new phenomenon of large-scale economic systems. It was initially called *'political economy'* largely to signal a concern with trade, production, and wealth at the scale of states not just households. Mainstream economics is not about state-dominated economies, but about private property and how to allocate it in decisions about consumption, savings, and investment. Though grounded in an idealized image of individuals making such decisions, it uses mathematics and statistics to address both larger scale and law-like patterns. Classical sociological theory engaged both the contexts and social organization of economic activity.

A classical sociological theorist as well as economist, Adam Smith (excerpted here) showed how manufacturing was transformed not only by new technology but new social organization.¹⁶ A coordinated division of labor was basic to every factory. This depended not just on management but on an ethic of work discipline, as Max Weber showed, and discipline was also necessary to investment: saving and reinvesting profits rather than only consuming luxuries. While Weber stressed this *"spirit of capitalism"* which he thought had religious sources. Karl Marx and Karl Polanyi both showed how labor discipline was more

coercively enforced, by fear of poverty, the power of capitalists, and government regulation. Trade unions and socialist politics were socially organized responses. Work, management, and investment were all transformed by the rise of large corporations.

Evolutionary theorists examined the transition from the fixed statuses of premodern societies, where most roles were determined by gender, age, descent, and kinship, to modern societies with their range of roles based on individual attributes, achievements, or contracts.¹⁷ Adam Smith analyzed how new divisions of labor made work more productive; markets expanded as different people and whole countries had different things to sell. Herbert Spencer, one of sociology's great 19th Century founders, saw differentiation as the key to social evolution, including the transition from 'militant' societies based on sheer power to industrial societies based on structures of cooperation. It was key as states branched out beyond simply exercising power through a military hierarchy, to undertake a range of different kinds of administration including eventually education, housing, and health care. Emile Durkheim (excerpted here) linked division of labor to 'dynamic density' – a matter not of physical crowding but of the number and complexity of transactions typical of modern society – and through this to social integration based not on similarity alone, but on relationships among people who were different from each other. Talcott Parsons continued this functional analysis by showing the relations of economic activity to other institutions, like education. He held that by the post-WWII era, problems of economic exploitation and disruption had been minimized; government policy combined with representation of workers through unions to produce a functional balance.

Functionalist theories emphasized the evolution of spontaneous structures of cooperation, though they thought good policies could help these along. Their examples of 'earlier' stages came mainly from smaller scale peoples of the Americas and Africa. But colonialism brought greater knowledge of India, a very large-scale society that didn't fit the premodern/modern contrast easily. India's caste system was an almost infinitely complex hierarchy built largely out of kinship and descent, but also religion and occupation. But caste hierarchy was different from class. As Marx analyzed it, class was based on the sale of labor power as part of the relations of production. Others saw class simply as differences of income and wealth. Either way, class was reproduced more in strictly economic distinctions and less in elaborate cultural codes. Later sociologists would use the distinction to analyze the relations between race and class – for example in the US South. Race was embedded in a whole set of cultural norms governing things like who could mix with whom – or drink out of the same drinking fountain. Efforts to forge class solidarity based on the common interests of Black and white workers kept foundering on these caste distinctions.

Issues like this illustrate what Polanyi called the 'embedding' of markets in society. To say something like "it's all just supply and demand" is not realism about economic life but a radical abstraction from actually existing markets and social life. Abstraction can be a useful tool, but when it is confused with more complex reality it becomes ideology and is usually misleading. Similarly, evolution is not just a shift from culturally embedded codes of status to markets and contracts that are somehow autonomous from culture and society. First, changes usually reflect power relations. Second, both markets and contracts are shaped deeply by differentiations rooted in the rest of social life. The different roles and rewards given to women workers offer a prime example.

Karl Marx also pointed out that economic production depended on social organized reproduction – like raising children. Polanyi showed how both family and community mattered. But neither Marx nor Polanyi went deeply into the gender roles that made childrearing and reproduction more generally largely women’s work. This became a theme for 20th century feminist theorists. As Jane Addams (excerpted here) pointed out, much was unpaid, embedded in family relations. And when household labor was paid – commodified – it often meant racial minorities and immigrants working for middle class families.

Marx, Polanyi and others also pointed to the exploitation embedded in the relation of rich countries to colonies. Slavery was one extreme form, developed in its modern form to serve plantation economies. Plantations produced cotton, which the textile mills of Britain or the US North converted into cloth and clothing. Colonies were run for the benefit of capitalist colonizers, as for example Britain undermined craft textile production in India in order to have markets for factory-made goods. Followers of Marx saw former colonies locked into subordinate positions and exploitation. Followers of Parsons and other modernization theorists argued that a process of development could enable them to follow in the path of the already rich countries.

Individuals. In the Middle Ages, and indeed in much of history beyond Europe, most people were peasants, making a living in agriculture, with any surplus production beyond their mere subsistence needs appropriated for cities and their elites. Indeed, they had less leisure time and freedom than people in small-scale societies that lived by hunting and fishing. Peasant lives were short, focused largely on survival, with few choices about consumption. The individuality of a few people – kings, heroic warriors, poets, priests, and philosophers – was celebrated but treated as exceptional. This doesn’t mean that individual qualities weren’t recognized among non-elites or that they were never individually creative. It means their material choices were limited. One effect of producing economic goods beyond the requirements of subsistence was that choice could proliferate. This was a major source of the individualism classical sociological theorists saw as characteristic of the modern era.

Individualism could mean lots of things.¹⁸ It could mean valuing personal freedom over social obligations. It could mean that people should have rights as individuals, like those to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness claimed in the US Declaration of Independence. It could mean that people should look inside themselves to find the authentic inner meaning of their lives or that expressing one’s own thoughts and desires was important. It could mean an honorable independence of mind or a disreputable selfishness.

We saw that Hobbes and other social contract theorists analyzed legitimate government by positing separate individuals and asking about their choices. This is sometimes called atomism or methodological individualism. The basic idea is not to take a stand on how much individualism is good, but to break society into its smallest units for clearer analysis. Emile Durkheim objected, arguing that individuals *by themselves* were *not* the smallest units of society. Society was made up, rather, of social relationships; individuals were always embedded in these relationships. Talcott Parsons continued this argument for seeing the social whole which conditioned all such individual behavior.

Most classical sociological theory rejected the idea that individuals were completely psychologically autonomous. “Self and society are twin-born,” wrote the pioneering