

The Blackwell Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists

Edited by

George Ritzer

THE BLACKWELL COMPANION TO MAJOR CLASSICAL
SOCIAL THEORISTS

BLACKWELL COMPANIONS TO SOCIOLOGY

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George Ritzer

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Preface

The publication of this two-volume paperback edition is a welcome event. While many social scientists and libraries added the original hardback, single-volume edition of *The Blackwell Companion to Major Social Theorists* to their collections, its price put it beyond the reach of all but the most well-heeled students. Thus instructors were unable, by and large, to assign it to their classes. The publication of these two volumes in paperback solves that problem by making the books much more affordable. Furthermore, dividing the original volume more-or-less in half allows those who teach classical theory to assign volume I, *The Blackwell Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists*, and those who teach contemporary theory to use volume II, *The Blackwell Companion to Major Contemporary Social Theorists*. In addition, for those who teach general courses in theory, both volumes can be assigned. The books can be used as basic texts, or as supplements to more conventional textbooks in social and sociological theory. Since the essays are original contributions authored by experts on particular theorists, the two volumes should also be useful to scholars looking for up-to-date and authoritative overviews of the work of the major social theorists.

Some minor changes have been made to the text, but in the main the essays are the same as those that appeared in the original hardback edition. One major change is that the original introductory essay has been used as the basis for new introductory essays, each directed at the unique concerns of the volume in which it appears. Thus the volume of the classics opens with an essay by Douglas Goodman entitled, "Narratives, *Geistesgeschichtes*, and the History of Social Theory." Goodman's essay outlines five narrative approaches to the history of sociology, making the case for critical and effective histories of social theory that place classical theoretical perspectives in dialogue with present-day theoretical orientations and challenge the ideal of theoretical progress. The volume on

contemporary theory begins with an essay by Todd Stillman, "Metatheorizing Contemporary Social Theorists." Stillman catalogues the forces that contribute to intellectual breakthroughs and develops a systematic approach to the intellectual and social factors that have influenced contemporary social theorists.

Overall, these volumes present essays by leading contemporary social theorists on their classical predecessors and contemporary peers. Having written chapters or essays on many of the people covered here, I have a great appreciation for these essays. In fact, I learned a great deal from each of them and I believe that most, if not all, readers will find these essays edifying.

Beyond the contributors, there are a number of other people to thank. I begin with Susan Rabinowitz, who proposed that I undertake this project and was of great help throughout its creation and development. Ken Provencher at Blackwell helped to put the paperback volumes into print. I could not have done these books without the help of Douglas Goodman, who not only wrote the introductory essay to the classical volume but read and commented on all of the essays and helped with the innumerable details involved in bringing this project to fruition. I also need to thank Todd Stillman, who authored the introduction to the contemporary volume and kept track of the revisions. My undergraduate research assistants Zinnia Cho and Jan Geesin also provided valuable research assistance.

George Ritzer

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Douglas J. Goodman completed his dissertation, “The Sociology of Freedom,” at the University of Maryland at College Park, and is now an assistant professor at the University of Puget Sound, WA. He has published pieces on Lacan, Luhmann, and Habermas, and has written on the sociology of consumption and postmodernism.

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Victor Lidz was taught by Talcott Parsons at Harvard, and, after graduation in 1962, entered the Department of Social Relations there as a graduate student to continue studies in sociological theory. From 1963 to 1968, he served as Parsons's research assistant. In the 1970s, he taught seminars on new developments in the theory of social action with Parsons at both the University of Chicago and the University of Pennsylvania. Lidz received his doctorate in sociology from Harvard University in 1976. He is presently Acting Director of the Institute for Addictive Disorders, Department of Psychiatry, MCP Hahnemann University in Philadelphia.

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George Ritzer is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland, where he has been a Distinguished Scholar-Teacher and won a Teaching Excellence Award. He has chaired the American Sociological Association's sections on Theoretical Sociology and Organizations and Occupations. George Ritzer has held a Fulbright-Hays Fellowship, has been a Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study and the Swedish Collegium for Advanced Study in the Social Sciences, and has held the UNESCO Chair in Social Theory at the Russian Academy of Sciences. His major areas of interest are sociological theory and metatheory, as well as the application of theory to the sociology of consumption. In the former, his major publications are *Sociology: a Multiple Paradigm Science* (1975/1980), *Toward an Integrated Sociological Paradigm* (1981) and *Metatheorizing in Sociology* (1991). In the latter, he has written *The McDonaldization of Society* (1993, 1996), *Expressing America: a Critique of the Global Credit Card Society* (1995), *The McDonaldization Thesis: Explorations and Extensions* (1998) and *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption* (1999). His work has been translated into many languages: *The McDonaldization of Society* alone has been, or is being, translated into more than a dozen languages. He is currently co-editing the *Handbook of Social Theory* with Barry Smart.

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Introduction: Narratives, *Geistesgeschichtes*, and the History of Social Theory

DOUGLAS J. GOODMAN

One of the purposes of this volume is to contribute to the narrative history of social theories. In other words, to tell stories about theories and theorists. This seems harmless and academic, at least until one realizes that neither theories about society nor stories about theories of society are confined to professional academics. Indeed, social change that is not merely reactive requires theories. Pragmatic agents engaged in changing their society cannot avoid thinking about how their society works and how the society affects the way that individuals think. It is but a short step from there to considering how others have thought a society works and how they were affected by their society. Such considerations only become useful when we have developed a story that connects the way that we think about society to the way that others have thought about society. Thus we move naturally from wanting to change society, to developing a social theory, to studying other social theories, to developing narratives about social theories.

This collection contributes to the narrative history of social theories in at least three ways. First, and most obviously, the chapters themselves are narratives about social theorists. They are biographies related to tales of intellectual disputes set within epic social histories. The stories move from the theorists' social and intellectual context to present-day impacts and assessments. Second, the selection of the twelve classical theorists covered in this volume implies a narrative of social theory because this cast of characters was selected to fit if not a specific plot, then at least a *mise-en-scène*. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this volume provides a source book for constructing not only new theories, but also new narratives of social theory. Retellings and reinterpretations, such as those in this volume, have always been more than a resource for present controversies. They have been an intrinsic part of most of social theory's

paradigmatic shifts. Therefore, although any list of theorists covered in a collection such as this one can be read as an official canon, the editor intends that this book be used as “canon fodder” in an open, contestable process of theory construction and reconstruction.

To say, however, that these are narratives, or that they are meant to contribute to narrative reinterpretations is not to say enough, because there are many ways in which the story of social theory can be told and not all of them fit the intention of this collection. In what follows, I will use Richard Rorty’s¹ genres of historiography to analyze four types of narrative histories of social theory represented in these chapters. Focusing on one of Rorty’s types, I then employ a typology derived from Donald Levine’s work to analyze several of the ways in which sociological narratives connect the past to the present in order to suggest progress and continuity. I will close by making the case for the addition of a fifth type of narrative: critical and effective histories (derived from the work of Michel Foucault).

Richard Rorty discusses four genres of historiography and, although he is dealing with narrative histories of philosophy, his typology can be applied to social theory. Let us begin with the genre that Rorty refers to as “most familiar and dubious,” *doxography*. A doxography is an old familiar story or the commonsense version of history. In social theory, this would be an approach that enumerates what various authors traditionally called sociologists have had to say about topics traditionally defined as sociological. This type of narrative takes a list of supposedly timeless sociological issues such as order, control, organization, etc., and cites the exemplary contributions made by an equally timeless list of social theorists. It makes the mistake of taking both central sociological issues and exemplary social theorists as natural rather than contestable constructions. Rorty sees this genre as a degenerate form fit only for the most basic pedagogical purposes.

It would be easy in a collection such as this to accept a timeless list of social theorists and simply offer new interpretations of these people and their contributions. While there are certainly a number of such essays here, there are also essays on thinkers who would traditionally not be covered in such a volume: Martineau, Gilman, and Du Bois. The editor made a conscious effort to extend the net and include thinkers who have not heretofore been considered part of the canon. More importantly, the idea that there can be such a timeless list is rejected. All such lists are provisional and it is my expectation that future collections will offer somewhat different rosters. The list of thinkers dealt with in this book tells us much about the state of social theory at the beginning of the twenty-first century (and undoubtedly about the person doing the selecting), but in a decade or two, the list of authors covered will almost certainly be very different.

The idea that there is a timeless list of social theorists can become a strait-jacket. At the very least, it quickly becomes dated, because both the social world and social theory are continually changing. For example, a similar book a few decades ago would probably have not included any women. That this collection does indicates both a change in society and in theoretical thinking. While this

particular choice – indeed all choices – is open to debate and disagreement, what is indisputable is the fact that lists of our centrally important social theorists are open to continual change.

Although it may offend the sacred priests of what Robert Alun Jones² calls the “Nacirema Tsigoloicos,” the work of no theorist is timeless. Marx, Weber, Durkheim, and a few others have been of great importance for a century or more, but the time will come when they, too, will be relegated to the dustbin of history. At some point in the future, the social world will be so different that even Marx, Weber, and Durkheim will prove to be of little relevance in thinking about it. In fact, were this not to be the case, one would be forced to reconsider the whole enterprise of social theory. Changes in both society and social theory are inevitable and necessary. Doxographies obscure this fact.

Similarly, a belief in a timeless list of sociological problems restricts our vision to a horizon defined by a wish to remain still. It obscures the vistas opened up by unpredictable historical movements. For example, the topics of industrialization and modes of production were among the founding problems of modern sociology, but many have argued that the continued focus on them has led to the neglect of important changes in modes of consumption.³ A recent sociological theory text organized around subjects begins with rationality because it “has been at the foundation of dominant conceptions of modernity.”⁴ However, even where the topic appears to be abiding, as rationality certainly has, a closer look reveals that its meaning is not. The Kantian concept of reason that structured the debates around rationality at the end of the eighteenth century bears only a genealogical relation to postmodern contestations. The current controversy around rationality has inherited the name and a faint family resemblance, but it is not at all clear that the previous participants – for example, Durkheim and Kant or Weber and Marx – would recognize their progeny. Furthermore, there are certainly a number of theorists, especially those associated with a postmodern approach, who would argue that it is irrationality rather than rationality that characterizes large portions of contemporary society.

The second genre discussed by Rorty is called *rational reconstructions*. This is a presentist project that treats predecessors as contemporaries with whom one can exchange views. However, since the “founders” of sociology often had little to say about the problems we now regard as fundamental, this approach usually involves imagining what they would have said if only they had understood the importance of these issues. For example, Lemert, in his chapter on Charlotte Perkins Gilman, reconstructs some of her writings as an intervention in the debate around essentialism, even though the ambiguity of Lemert’s citations from her work suggest that this was an issue that held little interest for her. It is not that Lemert is arguing that Gilman really meant to assert a position on essentialism, but rather that her approach can provide a resource for a move in this current debate in which Lemert is himself involved. Another example would be Hoecker-Drysdale calling Harriet Martineau’s analysis an “immanent critique,” thereby locating Martineau’s method within the debate over the relative ground of normative criticism, although Martineau clearly had no such intent. But, of course, simply because Martineau’s naturalistic assumptions did

not require a critique that emerged from the system being examined does not mean that her reasoning cannot contribute to our current discussions.

For the purpose of rational reconstructions, it must be assumed that debates as well as concepts are more or less stable. In order to reconstruct the answers of past theorists, we must assume that they would understand today's questions. Furthermore, engaging in a rational reconstruction often means correcting what appear to us now to be their obvious mistakes; for example, reconstructing Durkheim's sacred/profane dichotomy in light of our present anthropological knowledge (see the discussion in chapter 6). This, of course, assumes that we now know better than they do. While this can often be said in the natural sciences, it is not always so obvious in social theory. The primary difference is that in social theory – Rorty makes this same point with regard to philosophy – the people that we assume we know better than are not just predecessors, but include our colleagues. To reconstruct what Marx would say about capitalist classes now that the proletariat revolution looks less than inevitable is to call not just Marx mistaken but also a number of our colleagues who are still waiting for the proletariat to cast off their chains.

The presentism, and assumptions of stable concepts and of knowing better than our predecessors are all serious problems with this approach, but Rorty argues that they are not fatal as long as we are aware of them. These assumptions contribute to a certain necessary reassurance that there is the possibility of progress because the problems we are working on are part of a tradition and not just trivial ephemera. Also, these rational reconstructions provide what disciplinary structures there are in sociology. Without rational reconstructions there would be no neo-Weberians, neo-Marxists, neofunctionalists, or any of the schools of sociology, since they all derive their vitality from reconstructing their received traditions.

There is one final point to be made regarding rational reconstructions, and this has an impact on the cohesiveness of sociological schools. Rational reconstructions do not necessarily converge. Parsons's rational reconstruction of Weber is radically different from Marcuse's.⁵ This means that some neo-Weberians may have more in common with neo-Marxists than with other neo-Weberians. Furthermore, since reconstructions are always to some extent fictions, it is not possible to say that one is wrong and it is even difficult to say that one is better than another.

The third genre is *historical reconstructions*. Here, rather than trying to understand what theorists might have said about our present controversies, the goal is to try to understand what they did say in the context of their contemporary controversies. Theoretical pronouncements are situated in their dialogic context and placed in relation to other texts of the period that address similar issues and use comparable rhetorical strategies. Doing a historical reconstruction usually means bracketing later developments and suspending judgments about what we now know better. Although a historical reconstruction is analytically distinct from a rational reconstruction, they are regularly conjoined in practice. The rational reconstruction of what sociologists would have said usually begins

with what they did say and involves an interpretation of our present context based upon their reconstructed historical context.

From the historical reconstructor's viewpoint, exemplary theorists may be most valuable where they seem most strange and alien. In other words, they are most useful when they are most difficult to rationally reconstruct. Such extraordinary ideas expose our "essential" questions and "timeless" issues as contingent socio-historical products. Historical reconstructions help us to recognize that there are other conversations than those we think are important today. Rather than assuring us of our progress, the historical reconstruction contributes to understanding our own socio-historical embeddedness.

One of the leading advocates of this approach in social theory has been Robert Alun Jones, author of the chapter on Durkheim in this volume. As he points out, it is a difficult undertaking, since it requires "a considerable breadth of knowledge of economic, political and social as well as intellectual history; a reading knowledge of relevant foreign languages; and at least some understanding of the principles of the philosophy of social science."⁶ It is, as Alan Sica notes, "risky for the most able scholars, foolhardy for many others."⁷ Even where successful, it can, as Sica points out, be professionally counterproductive. Mary Pickering, for example, argues in her chapter that our understanding of Comte is much too simplistic. However, the revelation of Comte's ambiguous relation to modernity may simply remove him from the canon, thereby devaluing Pickering's cultural capital. This is why a scholar may prefer to do a rational reconstruction such as Jonathan Turner's chapter on Spencer in order to increase the value of his or her intellectual investment.

Jones's chapter on Durkheim demonstrates that historical reconstructions are far from reductionist. Rather than seeing Durkheim's ideas as determined by social forces that are working behind the back of the theorist, Durkheim is presented as involved in debates with his contemporaries and as pursuing specific and concrete projects. Consequently, Jones is able to argue, for example, that it is absurd to read the *Division of Labor* as a challenge to Marx, since it is unlikely that Durkheim would have thought Marx to be a serious antagonist. The question as to whether we should take it as a challenge to Marx despite Durkheim's intent is not raised in this approach.

Kalberg's chapter on Weber demonstrates how important a historical reconstruction can be for understanding the limits of the theorist's concepts. While Weber is often portrayed as a theorist of a universal process of rationalization, Kalberg's historical reconstruction reveals rationalization to be a concept that Weber developed in order to explain the uniqueness of Western culture rather than as a universal drive. Weber's major works analyze specific and complex developments through a historical-comparative approach. Weber never intended his analysis to be applied to world-historical universals.

Finally, we come to the genre that Rorty champions and which he calls *Geistesgeschichte*. Like a rational reconstruction, it involves the idea of progress, but here progress is not simply assumed; instead it is narrated as an explicit part of the story. In addition, it is a narrative of continuity. Our connection to a set of

predecessors gives us hope that our project will be continued by our intellectual descendants. It provides the field with a necessary self-assurance and legitimacy without concealing its constructed nature.

A *Geistesgeschichte* works at the level of paradigms and problematics. It gives plausibility to a certain image of social theory rather than a particular solution of a given sociological problem. It defines which projects are sociological and distinguishes them from, for example, social philosophy. A *Geistesgeschichte* would argue for (rather than simply assume) a list of exemplary contributors to this reinterpreted project and it would narrate a story of progress and continuity in that endeavor.

Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action* includes a *Geistesgeschichte*, even though his professed intent was to provide a rational reconstruction. In the second edition of that book, Parsons insisted that it "was intended to be primarily a contribution to systematic social science and not to history, that is the history of social thought."⁸ But in order to legitimate his focus on the problem of social action and to be able to refer to economists, philosophers and, at that time, marginal sociologists, Parsons had to construct a *Geistesgeschichte* which became more influential and enduring than his particular theories. Indeed, the selection of classical theorists for this volume is still indebted to Parsons' *Geistesgeschichte*.

In fact, both rational and historical reconstructors rely upon an assumed *Geistesgeschichte* even when they do not find it necessary to construct one themselves. Rational reconstructors do not really want to bother reconstructing and engaging with minor sociologists. Historical reconstructors would like to reconstruct sociologists who are currently relevant or who, they argue, can be. In both cases, there needs to be a narrative that constructs a connection between what was important and what is important. For example, Pickering is most persuasive when she places her historical reconstruction within a *Geistesgeschichte* that connects Comte's complexity to present sociological problems.

A *Geistesgeschichte* is intrinsically related to canon formation. The fight over who fits into the history of a discipline is connected to controversies over the image of the field. It is not just a question of who is discerning enough or original enough to be an exemplary figure, but more importantly, who is sociological enough. For instance, one of Lemert's chapters convincingly argues that Du Bois's ideas are important, but we could still question whether they are social theory. Even though such debates seem to be about the honor of the designation, they are more prescriptive than is usually acknowledged. It is not about who deserves the honor of belonging to a predefined category, but about what the definition of the category should be. First, what criteria should distinguish a social theorist; second, what are the criteria that mark a classic in that field?

Unlike rational reconstructions, *Geistesgeschichten* must concern themselves with anachronisms. The question of who belongs in the canon cannot be decided merely by present concerns. And unlike historical reconstructions, they cannot stay within the context of the past. *Geistesgeschichten* must narrate a bridge to the present. Most importantly, this connection between the past and the present

cannot be simply assumed. When that occurs, when the *Geistesgeschichte* no longer appears to be controversial, we have degenerated into doxology.

To the list of drawbacks of living in our present age must be added this one advantage: *Geistesgeschichtes* are less likely to degenerate into doxologies. The narratives, the canon and the image of the field seem, in our current condition, to be incorrigibly unstable. Rorty states the invitation that this book intends to offer to its readers. "He or she should be free to create a new canon, as long as they respect the right of others to create alternative canons. . . . They should be urged to try it, and to see what sort of historical story they can tell when these people are left out and some unfamiliar people are brought in."⁹

A TYPOLOGY OF *GEISTESGESCHICHTE*S

Of the narrative forms that Rorty delineates, *Geistesgeschichtes* are those that explicitly construct a story of progress and continuity that connects the past to the present. Its central trope is a specific image of the field and its illocutionary effect is to create a canon. Since so many of the chapters in this collection offer this type of narrative, it may be useful to refine the typology. We don't intend to use this to pigeonhole these essays, since, like all good stories, they use multiple narrative techniques. Rather, we will use the refined typology as "sensitizing concepts" for the analysis of theoretical narratives.¹⁰

We see in the essays five different ways in which the past is connected to the present in order to suggest progress and continuity: (a) classical; (b) positivist; (c) pluralist; (d) convergent; and (e) contextualist. Donald Levine's perceptive book, *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*, is the source of some of these labels, if not of the precise formulation given them here.¹¹

In a classical approach, past theorists are seen as foundational for the discipline and current theoretical approaches are built upon traditions that can rarely be completely superseded. Progress is recognized in the refinement and development of this foundation. A classic has been defined as "a book to be read partly because it is regarded as having been widely read."¹² Put this way, the status of the classic appears circular, but this in no way diminishes its importance. There *is* a circular relation between the present and the past. What is important in the past is a function of our present questions, but our present questions are, to a significant degree, determined by our past. Such, for example, is our relation with Marx. As Antonio's chapter in this volume makes clear, Marx is still a vital resource for our current theoretical problems. But, just as clearly, Marx's relevance for current controversies has as much to do with his prescience as it does with the fact that he helped to delineate what the controversies are; he defined them and brought them to our attention as social theorists. Just as it has been said that all of philosophy is a series of footnotes on Plato, it could be said that social theory, to date, consists of a series of footnotes on Marx.

Continuity and progress is guaranteed by the founding traditions of our field. According to the classical approach, these traditions will be criticized, but they are difficult to entirely supplant, because the criticism usually ends up taking a

form that is profoundly influenced by the tradition that is the target of criticism. For example, Marx's theories are sometimes criticized as reflections of the early industrialized capitalist mode of production of his society, and therefore of less relevance to our current mode of production. A moment's reflection will reveal that this criticism is still within the Marxist model. Whatever its intent, this type of criticism does more to perpetuate Marx's ideas by demonstrating their potential for self-criticism than any so-called orthodox appropriation.

With the second type, the positivist approach, past theories are seen as containing dispersed true empirical knowledge mixed in with virtually useless speculation. Progress is seen in the identification, collection, and systematization of this empirical knowledge. The positivist *Geistesgeschichte* tells the story of social theory's progression from a speculative philosophy through a plurality of theoretical approaches and finally entering, or about to enter, its true phase of rigorously empirical investigations. Classical theories represent either speculative philosophy (Comte, Spencer) or one-sided theoretical viewpoints (Durkheim, Simmel, Weber) that have been absorbed and surpassed by a coherent body of scientifically grounded theoretical conceptions. These previous theorists represent a transitional stage on the way to the subordination of ideas to controlled observation.

Merton (see volume II) is often taken as a model for a positivist approach, especially since he began his much cited work on the classics with a quote from Whitehead that seemed to sum up the positivist view. "A science which hesitates to forget its founders is lost."¹³ However, Merton interprets this warning somewhat differently than his positivist followers. In the foreword to the second edition of Coser's *Masters of Sociological Thought*, Merton argues that engagement with the classics must include more than simply distilling verifiable hypothesis: "The direct study of masterworks helps us to acquire intellectual taste and style, a sense for the significant problem and for the form of its solution."¹⁴

It should come as no surprise that Jonathan Turner, who has championed the positivist cause in sociological theory, should present Herbert Spencer through a positivist narrative. Turner argues that we can ignore Spencer's speculation about social Darwinism and his "organismic analogy" and focus on Spencer's use of cross-cultural data and his testable functionalist predictions.

A third type is the pluralist narrative. This approach views the past as a repository of diverse ideas and theoretical standpoints that can contribute to the manifold theories necessary for analyzing a pluralistic society. Here progress is identified with the growth of multiple perspectives, which are necessary for analyzing something as complex and multilayered as society. Social theory is viewed as a collection of paradigms with differing methodological, philosophical, and political assumptions. Often these paradigms are seen as having intimate and necessary relations with other disciplines, such as psychology, literature, philosophy. In this narrative, exemplary theorists are paradigm builders who provide incisive summaries of alternative approaches. What makes their work classic is its inherent plurality and openness to rereadings.

In this collection, Mary Rogers presents Schutz within a pluralist narrative. Schutz is praised for his transdisciplinary theory, which provides a difficult to

categorize alternative for such varied subsequent theoretical approaches as queer theory, feminism, multicultural theory, and ethnomethodology. Schutz is seen as enabling a non-reductive dialogue between a European philosophical tradition and an increasingly scientized American sociology. Indeed, one cannot help wondering if Schutz's own plural influences – not only philosophy and sociology, but also law and banking – led to his theory of irreconcilable multiplicities and overlapping but distinct experiential worlds. Neither in his life nor in his theory did these spheres ever converge. At most, Schutz found only bridging concepts to negotiate the overlapping borders.

Simmel is, in many ways, the pluralist *par excellence*. Consequently, it is only from the pluralist approach that his contribution to sociology can be appreciated. As Scaff notes, Simmel never founded a school or movement and never intended to. Instead he contributed daring, impressionistic perspectives. These are practically useless from the classical viewpoint and contain only the faint possibility of providing positivistic hypotheses, but for a pluralist, “it is precisely these alleged deficiencies that have once again made Simmel an engaging presence” (chapter 7).

Convergence is the fourth type of narrative. From this viewpoint, pluralism represents an early stage of partial attempts that we are now able to see as contributing to a coherent totality. Exemplary early theorists are those who identified problems and offered partial solutions that now converge and are surpassed.

Parsons's convergence thesis is a famous example of this. Parsons saw himself as bringing together and developing the views of Durkheim, Pareto, Weber, and Alfred Marshall, among others. Indeed, he argued in the opening chapter of his *The Structure of Social Action*, that one of the main arguments in favor of his own theory was that it could be found in partial and undeveloped form in these previous thinkers.

Shalin's chapter on Mead shows most clearly the importance of the convergence of acknowledged and unacknowledged influences. Mead explicitly engaged the theories of Kant and Hegel in order to show that they were partial solutions that now converged in a new pragmatist social philosophy. Driving this theoretical convergence, as well as driving the convergence between theory and political reform, was the influence of Mead's religious upbringing. Shalin suggests that Mead's social theories were, in many ways, an attempt to transform a failed religious belief into a partial solution that converged with some of the very ideas (e.g. Darwinism) that originally contradicted it.

A fifth narrative type is a contextual approach that sees the history of theory and the status of classics as primarily due to forces that are external to their intellectual content. Social theories are seen as tightly connected to the social context from which they emerge and which they try to describe. Progress and continuity are guaranteed by society – the subject and context of the theories rather than the theories themselves. In many cases, the contextual approach is not a *Geistesgeschichte*; that is, it is not a progressive, self-assuring story that connects what was important in the past to what is important in the present. Instead it functions as an ideology critique, revealing the way in which the

cognitive substance of the social theory is subordinate to its political context, whether that political context is a macro one of industrial rationalism¹⁵ or the micro situation of academic reputation of Harvard.¹⁶

Nevertheless, there are two ways that a contextualist approach can be used within a *Geistesgeschichte*. First, a contextualist analysis can help to explain historical facts that seem to contradict a progressive and self-assuring story. For instance, although Pickering points out the originality of Comte's sociology, which seems to transcend his sociohistorical position, she invokes the "binary logic of his times," and his fragile mental health to explain his views on women. Second, what was important in the past and what is important now can be connected through their relation to an evolving social context. For example, Scaff argues that Simmel is an important representative of *fin de siècle* Vienna. This would seem to make him of merely historical interest, except that Scaff makes the further argument that the type of intellectual whirl in Vienna that was marginal to Western society a hundred years ago has become central to ours. This typology suggests the variety of forms that a *Geistesgeschichte* can take. They all have in common the themes of self-assurance and progress that Rorty argues is necessary. Natural scientists can look to increased control of the natural environment as evidence of progress and be assured that they participate in an endeavor that is going somewhere. Funding agencies can be similarly assured that they are making a good investment. Disciplines that can cure illness, provide energy, and feed people may have little need of legitimating narratives, but Rorty suggests that social theory does need *Geistesgeschichtes*, so that those who devote their lives to such a suspect pursuit maintain their psychological well-being and continue to receive even the slight institutional support that they have now. This is a persuasive argument until we notice that Rorty's own historical studies cannot be located in his typology. *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, for example, could hardly be called a *Geistesgeschichte*. It pursues no theme of progress and self-assurance. Let us then use the phrase that Mitchel Dean¹⁷ borrows from Foucault to describe a fifth genre of narrative – *effective and critical histories* – to put alongside Rorty's doxologies, rational reconstructions, historical reconstructions, and *Geistesgeschichte*.

EFFECTIVE AND CRITICAL HISTORIES

Instead of a self-assuring narrative of progress, an effective and critical history is problematizing. Furthermore, it is pragmatic, using historical analysis to understand the basis for practical transgressive experiments. Its goal is to discover what ideas, dialogues, and practices are still necessary and what can now be seen as merely contingent. For example, Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (discussed in Barry Smart's chapter in volume II), investigated whether the connection between identity and sexuality was still necessary and what new experimental practices involving bodies and pleasure are now possible. We do not find in Foucault the notion that the new experiments represent progress over the old

regime. The aim of his historical analysis is to open up novel possibilities, not to establish advancements.

An effective and critical history of sociology is not simply a response to a more pluralist, more postmodern, or even more cynical social context. It is a project that is internal to sociology, “a strategic reformation of the complex relations between sociology and history that are the conditions of existence of sociology as a discipline.”¹⁸ In this narrative, the study of exemplary theorists is used to oppose, undermine, or qualify present directions instead of support them. Theorists will find little assurance here since their own contributions will be similarly opposed, undermined, and qualified. Like the *Geistesgeschichte*, an effective and critical history is related to both historical and rational reconstructions. Historical reconstructions are used to challenge our present concerns while rational reconstructions allow historical reconstructions their greatest impact. It is, after all, not a general history, but a history of the present that is being pursued: a history that traces the tricks, ruses, and reversals that have led to what we now consider to be necessary.

This, for example, is what we see in Lemert’s chapter on Gilman. Lemert problematizes our relation to social theory by questioning the division between theory and fiction. He positions Gilman’s work – both theory and fiction – as practical transgressions meant to shake “the gendered foundations of modern life.” And yet we see in Lemert no description of progress in theoretical understanding. Indeed, it is precisely this belief in progress that Lemert rejects in Gilman’s thinking.

In his chapter, Lemert does not suggest novel possibilities, but he does praise the imagination that would open up such possibilities, and perhaps that is all that is proper for the author in such a collection. It is certainly all that is proper for the author of an introduction. The real work must be done by the reader.

Notes

- 1 Richard Rorty (1984) *The Historiography of Philosophy: Four Genres*. In R. Rorty, J. Schneewind, and Q. Skinner (eds), *Philosophy in History: Essays on the Historiography of Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 49–76.
- 2 Robert Alun Jones (1980) *Myth and Symbol among the Nacirema Tsigoloicos: a Fragment*. *American Sociologist*, 15, 207–12.
- 3 For an excellent overview see Don Slater (1997) *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press. For an application see George Ritzer (1999) *Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press.
- 4 Shane O’Neill (1999) *Rationality*. In F. Ashe, A. Finlayson, M. Lloyd, I. Mackenzie, J. Martin, and S. O’Neill (eds), *Contemporary Social and Political Theory*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- 5 See the essays by Parsons, Marcuse, and others in O. Stammer (ed.) (1971) *Max Weber and Sociology Today*. New York: Harper & Row.
- 6 Robert Alun Jones (1983) *On Merton’s “History” and “Systematics” of Sociological Theory*. In L. Graham, W. Lepehies, and P. Weingart (eds), *Functions and Uses of Disciplinary Histories*. Dordrecht: D. Reidel, p. 126.

- 7 Alan Sica (1997) Acclaiming the Reclaimers: the Trials of Writing Sociology's History. In C. Camic (ed.), *Reclaiming the Sociological Classics: the State of Scholarship*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, p. 296.
- 8 Talcott Parsons (1969) Preface to Second Edition. In *The Structure of Social Action*. New York: Free Press, pp. xv–xvi.
- 9 Rorty, (1984), p. 67, n. 2.
- 10 Herbert Blumer (1969) What is Wrong with Social Theory? In H. Blumer, *Symbolic Interaction: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, p. 148.
- 11 Donald Levine (1995) *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- 12 Michael Levin (1973) What Makes a Classic in Political Theory? *Political Science Quarterly*, 88(3), 469.
- 13 Robert K. Merton (1967) On the History and Systematics of Sociological Theory. In *On Theoretical Sociology*. New York: Free Press, p. 1.
- 14 Robert K. Merton (1977) Foreword to L. Coser, *Masters of Sociological Thought: Ideas in Historical and Social Context*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, p. viii.
- 15 Bruce Mazlish (1989) *A New Science: the Breakdown of Connections and the Birth of Sociology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- 16 Charles Camic (1992) Reputation and Predecessor Selection. *American Sociological Review*, 57, 421–45.
- 17 Mitchell Dean (1994) *Critical and Effective Histories: Foucault's Methods and Historical Sociology*. New York: Routledge.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 10.

1

Auguste Comte

MARY PICKERING

Love for the principle and Order for the
base; Progress for the goal.

*Auguste Comte, Système de politique
positive*

In our postmodern world, where doubts about the inevitability of progress and the value of rationalism have weakened utopian impulses, Auguste Comte appears at first glance to be a quaint, outmoded figure. The “founder” of sociology and positivism seems to evoke a faraway era, when the benefits of social planning and the validity of knowledge went largely unquestioned. Yet as Robert Scharff (1995, p. 6) has recently suggested, the theories of this important nineteenth-century French philosopher have perhaps never been so relevant. Comte foreshadowed many issues that contemporary thinkers are grappling with today: the basis of truth, the role of politics in modern society, the root of moral crises, the significance of memory, and the problem of gender, class, and racial identities. More complex than is commonly assumed, Comte’s contribution to social theory bears renewed examination.

THE THEORY

Comte’s reputation rests on his dual achievement of establishing a new discipline, sociology, and closely connecting it to a novel philosophical system, which he called positivism. In the *Cours de philosophie positive*, published in six volumes between 1830 and 1842, Comte argued that because theory always precedes practice, the reconstruction of the post-revolutionary world could be

accomplished only by extending the scientific, or “positive,” method to the study of politics and society, the last stronghold of theologians and metaphysical philosophers. To adopt the positive method meant tying scientific laws to the observation of concrete facts, especially by avoiding speculations, which were invariably “metaphysical” in nature. In his *Discours sur l'esprit positif* of 1844, Comte further explained that “the positive” designated the real, the useful, the certain, the precise, the relative, and the constructive (as opposed to the “negative”) (Comte, 1963, pp. 126–30). Once the positive science of society was established, positivism, the system embracing scientific knowledge, would be unified and complete because all our ideas would be scientific and thus homogeneous. Moreover, the science of society would unite all knowledge because it would focus people’s attention on humanity, which was also the object of study of the natural sciences. As a result, everyone would agree on the most essential intellectual and moral principles. Eliminating the anarchy that had ruled since 1789, the new social consensus would become the basis of a stable industrial order.

The science of society was thus the keystone of positivism. Comte asserted that because it would be based solely on the observation of social facts, without reliance on theological and metaphysical dogmas, it would have the certainty and unquestionable authority of the natural sciences. Following Francis Bacon’s precept that knowledge is power, Comte assumed that a firm grasp of the scientific laws of society would lead to greater control over this organism. Like other scientific laws, sociological laws would allow one to predict social phenomena and thus formulate suitable social policies. Comte gave the new science of society a specific mission to provide the principles necessary to end the moral, social, and political turmoil caused by the French Revolution of 1789.

To prove that the coming of the positive study of society was inevitable, Comte invented the classification of the sciences. This schema demonstrated that the order in which the sciences were created depended on the simplicity of their phenomena and the distance of these phenomena from man. Astronomy first became a science because it studied the simplest phenomena, those that were farthest from man. The positive method was then extended to disciplines whose subjects were increasingly complex and closer to man: physics, chemistry, and biology, in that order. Each more complex science depended on knowledge provided by the simpler sciences, which had to become positive first. Comte maintained that now that astronomy, physics, chemistry, and biology were positive sciences, it was time for the positive method to be applied to the study of society, which was the most complex science and focused entirely on man. He rejected the arguments of those who sought to reduce the study of society completely to another science, whether it be mathematics (especially statistics), biology, or political economy. To mark the birth of this new independent science, Comte coined a new term for it in 1839: “sociology” (Comte, 1975, volume 2, p. 88).

In keeping with his skepticism regarding metaphysics, he warned sociologists that they could not discover the source or nature of society; they could explain only the way its phenomena were related in space and time. For this reason,

sociology comprised two parts, social statics and social dynamics. Both stressed the interconnectedness of the members of the human species in order to counter the egoism of the modern age.

Social statics was the study of the social order. It focused on what kept society together. One crucial aspect of the social order was the family, which taught the importance of love as the basis of moral self-improvement. This love was transferred later to one's family and finally to humanity as a whole. Thus social statics cultivated a person's feelings of solidarity with other members of society. Although his atheism was unorthodox for the early nineteenth century, Comte's views on the sanctity of the family and other moral issues were conventional – in contrast to those of the Saint-Simonians and Fourierists who questioned social institutions.

Giving people a sense of connection with past and future generations of the human species, social dynamics analyzed social development, which Comte represented as continuous, necessary, orderly, and limited. Each social state grew out of the preceding one and generated the next social configuration. The salient feature of this development was that, through exercise, the unique characteristics of the human species – intelligence and sociability – became more dominant within both the individual and society.

Besides delineating the two divisions of sociology, Comte outlined the methods of this new science: observation, comparison, and experimentation. Because every aspect of society had multiple connections, Comte believed the areas of sociological observation were very diverse. Sociologists should study ordinary events, common customs, diverse types of monuments, languages, and other mundane social phenomena. Comte's insights into the significance of everyday life have been verified by recent social and cultural history.

As for experimentation, the second means of scientific investigation, Comte felt its use was problematic in sociology because of the impossibility of isolating any of the circumstances or consequences of a phenomenon's actions. He maintained that like a biologist, a sociologist must study pathological cases, which were forms of indirect experimentation. Because the pathological was simply a variation of the ordinary, examining periods of chaos, such as a revolution, provided clues to normality. The study of social disorder was an important means of gaining insights into the laws of social harmony and history.

Comparison was sociology's third method of scientific investigation. In sociology, there were three types of comparison. One could compare human and animal societies, different existing states of human society (i.e. savage and civilized peoples), or consecutive social states. The latter involved the historical method, which was related to social dynamics and constituted sociology's chief means of scientific investigation. History gave people a sense of social solidarity and continuity, in short a feeling for humanity in the world and their own role in its evolution.

The principal scientific law of sociology was a historical one: the law of three stages. Comte first "discovered" this law in 1822 and revealed its intricacies in his "fundamental opusculé," the *Plan des travaux scientifiques nécessaires pour réorganiser la société* of 1824 (Comte, 1929, volume 1, p. 1). According to this

law, each branch of knowledge (e.g. each science) and the mind itself passed through three modes of thinking: the theological, metaphysical, and positive. Such paradigms arose because all aspects of knowledge were interrelated and the mind naturally sought to make all ideas homogeneous.

Each of the three theoretical systems affected politics and society, for in Comte's view all of society represented an organic being in the process of a development influenced by intellectual progress. Intellectual evolution – especially scientific development – was the most advanced form of progress and served as the stimulus to historical change. In an important passage reflecting his idealism, Comte pointed out “that ideas govern and overturn the world, or in other words, that the entire social mechanism rests ultimately on opinions.” Like Hegel, he believed that history was the story of the “emancipation of human reason” (Comte, 1975, volume 1, pp. 38, 379). Moreover, as all aspects of society were interrelated, a change in one feature, such as intellectual life, led to changes in other facets of the social organism. Comte wrote, “In effect . . . all the classes of social phenomena develop simultaneously and under each other's influence” (Comte, 1929, volume 4, “Appendice,” p. 135).

In short, the law of three stages was a global one; it referred not only to intellectual evolution but to social and political developments as well. It depicted the different stages of progress that every civilization had to experience as well as a future positive age of social cooperation that was definitive, but not perfect. (Although society would see an increase in both intelligence and altruism, Comte believed ordinary man's moral and intellectual weaknesses – his natural egoism and mental lethargy – would never completely disappear.) The law of three stages also pertained to the intellectual trajectory of every person as he or she went through life. In addition, Comte recognized that the three stages actually represented three mentalities that could coexist at various times in a person's or civilization's history.

In the theological stage, man untangled the mystery of natural occurrences by relating them to supernatural beings, whose character was like his own. The notion that gods represented the first cause of all happenings and were in complete control of the universe was the theory that the mind needed in its infancy to link its observations. There were three substages in this first era of history: the fetishist, polytheistic, and monotheistic. In the first, gods resided in concrete objects. In the second, the gods became independent of the objects. In the third, a single god became the ruling principle. In a society that embraced the theological mode of explanation, priests and military men ruled. The theory of divine right was the reigning political doctrine.

The metaphysical stage of history, which began in the fourteenth century, was a transitional period. In searching for first and final causes, people started to connect observed facts with personified essences or abstractions, such as Nature, which were neither supernatural nor scientific. In the process, metaphysicians replaced priests as the spiritual power. Military men ceded their role as the temporal power to lawyers, for society began to direct its activities toward production, not simply conquest. The state of politics was embodied in the doctrines of popular sovereignty and natural rights.