

Part I

Foundations



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The Foundations of Social Theory

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INTRODUCTION

The emergence of social theory coincides with the emergence of modernity.¹ It can be seen in the most general sense to be a reflection on the nature of modern society. Social theory aims to provide a general interpretation of the social forces that have shaped the modern world. The classical tradition in social theory, the focus of this chapter, was one of the great attempts in modern thought to understand the totality of forces at work in the making of modern society. Classical social theory was both a product of modernity and at the same time an attempt to reflect critically on its problems.

Although it is more accurate to speak of classical traditions, for there was not one single one, underlying all approaches was a sense of modernity entailing a social crisis. All the major social theories were responses to the experience of crisis within modernity. The various epochal shifts in modernity from the eighteenth century to the present day have all been accompanied by different crises and this has varied depending on the national context. The view from early nineteenth-century France was very different from that in early twentieth-century Germany.

But modernity was not only experienced in terms of crisis, it was also experienced as a promise of new freedoms, and for many contained within it a utopian impulse. This tension between crisis and future possibility encapsulates both the spirit of modernity and the responses of social theorists to the predicament of modern society. On the one side, modernity offered the vision of a social order that has been variously understood in terms of human autonomy or freedom and, on the other, modern society has unleashed forces that have the tendency to destroy the future possibilities contained within it. As will be demonstrated in this chapter, the classical social theorists attempted in their different ways to make sense of modern society in terms of this dual conflict. Where social theorists have differed it has been in their responses to what has been often called the central conflict of modernity.²

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This chapter provides an assessment of the era of classical social theory from its origins in the Enlightenment to the post-World War II period.³ The central theme in this story is the fate of the Enlightenment in face of the reality of modern society. The chapter begins with a look at the rise of social theory in the Enlightenment period, roughly from the end of the seventeenth century in the first half of the nineteenth century. The next section concerns the legacy of the social thought of the Enlightenment in the formative period of modern social theory in the second half of the nineteenth century, beginning with Marx and including Spencer, Weber, and Durkheim and concluding with Simmel. The third section takes the aftermath of World War I as the point of departure to look at European social theory in the first half of the twentieth century, when disenchantment with modernity becomes particularly pronounced. The final section concerns the reorientation of the classical tradition in American social theory culminating in Parsons's attempt to establish a general social theory of modern society in all its complexity.

THE RISE OF THE SOCIAL AND ENLIGHTENMENT SOCIAL THEORY

While the origins of political theory go back to ancient thought, social theory is a product of modernity. The rise of social theory can be related to the emergence of the social as a specific domain separate from the sphere of the state and the realm of the household or private sphere. Early social theory was a response to the rise of "civil society" and the recognition that society was an artifact produced by human action as opposed to being part of the preordained nature of the world. The word "society" initially signified a pact or contract between the citizen and ruler, but increasingly lost its juridical meaning and acquired a social meaning as community, suggesting normative integration or a notion of solidarity in which social interaction was seen to entail symbolic relations. According to Talcott Parsons, in his first major work, published in 1937, *The Structure of Social Action*, modern sociology is essentially an attempt to find an answer to the problem posed by Thomas Hobbes (1588–1697) and John Locke (1632–1704), namely how social order is possible. While Hobbes and Locke conceived of this in political terms as a social contract, social theory properly begins only with the recognition that society is a reality in itself. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers were the first to give systematic consideration to the reality of the social. Émile Durkheim regarded Rousseau and Montesquieu as the founders of sociology. Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, published in 1762, introduced the notion of the "general will" as the symbolic basis of social subjectivity, which he linked to the importance of citizenship. Although he tended to view social institutions as corrupting the human spirit of freedom, he articulated a notion of society that was a departure from the earlier contractarian philosophies of the liberal thinkers. For instance, in the earlier *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, he argued that inequality is a product of society as opposed to being natural. But there is no doubt that it was Montesquieu in 1748, in *The Spirit of the Laws*, who advanced the first sociological conception of society. He demonstrated how social control operates through what he called social mores which were conditioned by geographic factors. One of his great themes was that of

the variability of human societies and the importance of social context. This work had a lasting influence on social theory in the idea it articulated that societies have inner logics of development and that the social is always more than the sum of its parts. Durkheim's notion of social representations or Weber's thesis of the spirit of capitalism all recall motifs in the work of Rousseau and Montesquieu, who drew attention in different ways to the symbolic structure of social relations, the idea of a spirit of will that transcends the sum of the parts.

Enlightenment social theory was most advanced in Scotland, where the so-called moral philosophers – Adam Ferguson and John Millar in particular – wrote about the rise of civil society (Strydom 2000). This was an age in which the older “court society” was being challenged by the rise of a new conception of society, known variously as bourgeois society or civil society. The realization that the social field was opening up forced the recognition that social thought had to address a wider sphere of interpretation than that of the domain of the state. Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, published in 1767, was one of the most advanced interpretations of civil society and exerted an important influence on Hegel. In *The Origins of the Distinction of Ranks*, in 1771, Millar developed an influential argument about the nature of social stratification in terms of the organization of society into classes, or “ranks.” Although he did not use the term social science, a term that did not come into currency until the end of the eighteenth century, he held that beneath the diversity of society is a structure of causality that can be known by science. What we have in these early works of modern social thought is the first attempt to develop a theory of society, that is an interpretation of the social as a distinctive reality. Pervading these Enlightenment theories of society was a sense of the emergence of modernity as the promise of a new principle of social integration. With this came a consciousness of a rupture of past and present. This sense of a fundamental discord at the heart of modernity was reflected in a range of dichotomies that were to define some of the core concerns of classical sociology: community and society, tradition and modernity, status and contract, differentiation and integration, solidarity and scarcity. Social theory from the beginning was greatly preoccupied with the search for a principle of social integration which could be capable of reconciling the contradictions of modernity and imposing unity on a disordered and fragmented world.

The French Revolution was the event that heralded the new age of social theory as an interpretation of the modern age, for no other episode encapsulated modernity more than 1789 and its aftermath, when entirely new visions of social and political order emerged. Post-revolutionary social theory was a product of the Enlightenment's quest for intellectual mastery, but it was also a response to the realization that the state alone was incapable of establishing social order. Enlightenment social theory was encapsulated in the work of two major thinkers whose work has exercised considerable influence on the subsequent history of social theory: Kant and Hegel (see Rundel 1987).

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) was not a social theorist in the conventional sense of the term, but his work has been important in establishing a foundation for much of modern social and political thought. In his major philosophical works he demolished the older notion of natural law and in its place he put human freedom and the autonomy of the individual. In this respect his work encapsulated the spirit of

modernity as one founded on the principle of freedom and a spirit of universalism that was based on what human beings could create for themselves rather than deriving from a preordained structure. The significance of his philosophical system – as outlined in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781 – was that it separated the claims of reason from those of faith, and moreover aimed to clarify the condition of the possibility of knowledge in order to limit knowledge to the domain of the empirical. This critical endeavor was hugely consequential in that it led to a differentiation of reason into different spheres, each with different truth claims. From Kant onwards – as is reflected in the work of Weber and Habermas for instance – relativism and universalism could no longer be considered as alternatives. After Kant the different spheres of knowledge – moral, religious, aesthetic, scientific – were differentiated, each with its own form of reason (Habermas 1987). In this way Kant demonstrated for social theory the relevance of a universalistic perspective, but one that had had to be reconciled to the particular.

Kant's 1784 essay "What Is Enlightenment?" has often been considered to be the defining text of the idea of modernity. For Kant, Enlightenment does not refer to an age but to a condition or attitude in which knowledge as self-critical reason becomes a means of emancipation. In works such as *The Idea of Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective* and the later and more important *Eternal Peace*, published in 1795, Kant outlined one of the first, and certainly the most influential, notion of a cosmopolitan political order. A supporter of Rousseau's republican political philosophy, Kant sought to extend the idea of a republican polity to the international context. In this respect Kant was the founder of modern cosmopolitanism understood in terms of a normative transnational order (see CHAPTER 27). In sum, Kant was the Enlightenment thinker who established the foundations of an emancipatory kind of social theory based on a cosmopolitan outlook and a critique of dogmatism.

G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) offered a deeper historical contextualization of Kant's philosophy and a conception of morality as a product of society. With Hegel epistemology becomes social theory, since for him the question is to explore how knowledge is constituted in history, a process which can be understood in terms of evolving modes of consciousness. Hegel's philosophy was the principal reference point for the Marxist and critical tradition in modern social thought. For Marx and the tradition he inaugurated, Hegel established the basis of a notion of critical knowledge as a form of consciousness-raising. In his major work, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, published in 1807, Hegel developed a dialectical conception of knowledge, which replaced Kant's critical philosophy in the view it espoused of the world as self-constituting. Society, nature, consciousness are always the working out of contradictions in a process of continuous self-creation. In *The Philosophy of Right*, published in 1821, his most sociological work, Hegel developed a theory of civil society, which, as remarked above, was influenced by Ferguson. In this work he advanced a notion of "ethical life" (*Sittlichkeit*), which can be related to the notion of community, or "life-world," and which is realized in the spheres of the private, civil society or the public realm, and the state. But civil society destroys ethical life because the "system of needs" is realized under the conditions of capitalism: "ethical life is split into its extremes and lost." The modern consciousness, as a result, is "an unhappy consciousness." For Hegel, the state is a higher expression of community

than civil society and has the function of compensating for the shortcomings of civil society. The theme of Hegel's social theory is that of the fragmentation and alienation of consciousness in civil society and the search for a political solution for the realization of community. It laid the foundations of social theory by providing a framework to interpret social and epochal change and the search for a viable social and political order.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT LEGACY AND CLASSICAL EUROPEAN SOCIAL THEORY

The social thought of the Enlightenment was characterized by a certain utopianism, which was a reflection of the belief in the promises of modernity to bring about freedom. Unlike earlier social thought, it displayed a great belief in the power of human action to shape the future. The social and political thought of Kant and Hegel displayed that utopianism, but in Hegel the first signs of a disenchantment with modernity are to be found in his thoughts on the "unhappy consciousness" and the destructive forces of civil society. The preoccupation with utopia and the question of social order in an age of revolution was most evident in the work of Auguste Comte (1798–1857) who, along with Karl Marx, effectively replaced philosophical analysis with an advanced social theory of modern society. Comte is generally credited as the founder of sociology, a term he coined in 1838 as a general science of society that was "positive" as opposed to speculative and hence superior to philosophy. His major work, the *Course of Positive Philosophy*, published between 1830 and 1842, is one of the great sociological interpretations of modernity, as well as an attempt to develop a theory and method for a positive sociology. Unlike all previous social theorists, Comte was the first to reflect systematically on the nature of society itself. As a post-revolutionary Enlightenment thinker he was already skeptical of the promises of the Enlightenment to bring about a new age of freedom. The theme that pervades his work is that of the incompleteness of the present. He was acutely aware of the crisis of modernity, for the post-revolutionary era was one of social disorder, terror, and fragmentation. In order to understand the present it was necessary to understand the entire historical process by which societies undergo change. Inspired by Hegel, his sociology was one that stressed change and, as with Hegel, an approach to the history of human societies that saw societies undergoing change accordingly as their systems of knowledge changed. His "law of the three stages" describes the normative process by which societies progress from the "theological stage" (when magical or prereflective kinds of knowledge were dominant), to the "metaphysical stage" (characterized by rational and abstract knowledge, such as conceptions of law and sovereignty), and finally to the "positive stage" (where modern experimental science becomes the dominant mode of knowledge and consciousness). It was not quite clear whether the positive stage had begun or whether it was a utopian projection of the modern condition, but it is evident that Comte saw the positive age as the promise of a new modernity in which the crisis of the age would be overcome.

His contribution to sociology has been significant. He introduced new terms for the analysis of societies, such as the distinction between "social statics" and "social

dynamics” – terms that suggest order and change – and a view of sociological analysis as the investigation of structure and functions. Influenced by developments in biology, Comte believed that societies could be analyzed in terms of the functional relationship of the part and the whole. For him modernity is above all a product of the growing power of knowledge. The age that he saw dawning was the era of positivism, by which he meant an age in which knowledge would be fully diffused in society and science would be the new religion.

Comte was the pre-eminent social thinker of the 1830s, and influential beyond France (Heilbron 1995). His work can be seen as establishing the foundation of classical social theory in the sense of a systematic sociological analysis of modern society. However, from the 1850s Comte’s sociological positivism received its greatest challenge from the revolutionary tradition, which Karl Marx recovered and recast as a theory of society. At this stage social theory becomes a critique of the Enlightenment whose legacy increasingly would be seen to be inadequate. In place of the Enlightenment’s emphasis on knowledge as emancipatory Marx stressed the ideological nature of knowledge, and in place of the individual as the primary agent he put the collective actor. For the utopian impulse that was a feature of the theorists of the first half of the nineteenth century – Auguste Comte and Claude Saint-Simon for instance – Marx posited political action, for he did not see industrial society as the carrier of a new utopia. He was also a critic of the liberal theorists in his argument that rights must be complemented by social justice and that without the emancipation of labor there could be no real kind of freedom. Taking up Hegel’s critique of civil society, Marx extended Hegel’s account of fragmentation with an analysis of the class structure. Like Hegel, Marx believed that the social world could not be reduced to an essence but was composed of various contradictory forces, and that the aim of theory is to grasp this field of tensions. However, unlike Hegel, he did not see the resolution of these contradictions in a higher order (the state or “absolute mind,” as in Hegel). Marx retained the notion of dialectics but gave it a new significance in a more grounded social theory. He was possibly most sympathetic to the political economists of the age, but disagreed with them in their restrictive view of capitalism and their failure to see how capitalism is driven by class relations and the pursuit of profit for private appropriation.

Marx’s early work, *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, written in 1844, was dominated by the Aristotelian notion of “praxis,” which he linked to his major theme of alienation, the separation of subject from object. In this case, the separation of human subjectivity from the objectivity of society is analyzed in terms of the alienation of labor. Labor is the primary category of praxis, as human self-realization, creativity, and the actualization of needs. The older epistemological question of the separation of subject and object is now a struggle between capital and labor. In *Capital*, published in three volumes in 1867, 1885, and 1894, he outlined a purely sociological theory of capitalist society that had divested itself of much of the early philosophical language. The dominant theme of *Capital* as far as social theory is concerned is undoubtedly the notion of commodification. Capitalist society is a society that reduces all social relations to commodities, which are not just mere objects but “fetishisms” in that they are made up of distorted relations between subjectivity and objects. His concept of the “fetishism of commodities” demonstrated how structure and cultural production are intertwined and that

therefore culture cannot be seen as something that transcends social reality. Now social theory becomes the “critique of political economy,” for Marx’s work was located in the field of political economy. One of his principal endeavors was to explain the origin and significance of profit, which in his view was one of the driving forces in modern society. Unlike the classical economists (Proudhon, Ricardo, and Smith), Marx succeeded in explaining the origin of profit, outlined in his “labor theory of surplus value.” This theory is the basis of his entire theory of capitalism, and enabled Marx to argue that the class structure is the most fundamental structure in capitalist society and that it is based on a contradiction, for profit is generated in the exchange of labor for wages. The products generated by labor are objectified commodities in that they exist for profit which is privately appropriated by the owners of the means of production. So for Marx wage labor is the basis of profit and the source of a structural inequality. The resolution of this contradiction would be the driving force of capitalist society, making it the most dynamic society that has ever existed. In sum, then, for Marx modernity was above all characterized by commodification. The social as object of analysis could not be reduced to civil society and the struggle for rights, but required a critique whose normative standpoint was the struggle for social justice, Marx’s social theory was a critical one. Critique does not try to explain or simply interpret society for its own sake, but is inherently critical of the prevailing social order and seeks to reveal the system of domination. Marx established a tradition in social theory around the explanation of the rise and transformation of capitalist society. Attempts to explain the nature of capitalist society were not confined to Marxists, as is evident from such works as Werner Sombart’s seminal *Modern Capitalism*, published in 1902.

After Comte and Marx, social theory split into three classical traditions. If anything was common to all of them it was the declining significance of utopia that was a feature of the Enlightenment legacy and present in both Comte and Marx in different ways. The three can be summarized as a tradition that stems directly from Comte, and whose main representatives are Spencer and Durkheim; a heritage that derives from Marx and includes the critical tradition; and a tradition that goes back to Kant and includes Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Karl Mannheim, and Norbert Elias. The first tended towards a view of modernity in terms of a process of differentiation and liberal individualism; the second was a view of modernity in terms of capitalist domination and commodification; the third tradition brought social theory in the direction of a civilizational theory that stressed the role of values and cultural orientations in shaping social relations.

Comte’s ideas were taken up in a more systematic way by Herbert Spencer, who heavily influenced modern sociology. He took up Comte’s functionalism, which he established as the theoretical basis of sociological explanation. Social statics was to be the analysis of social order, while social dynamics was the analysis of change. His entire writings were based on the conviction that change was at work in the process of what he called differentiation, which arises from the interplay of matter, energy, and movement. His theory of evolution claimed that change was the result of a movement from simplicity to complexity and specialization. This movement – of uniformity and homogeneity to differentiation – was at work in all forms of matter, whether biological or social. The defining characteristic of modern society was the

ways in which differentiation worked to make integration possible. In place of the idea of utopia he emphasized progress, which was closer to the liberal philosophy of reformism that he espoused. The emergence of a differentiated modern society was the result of a process of evolutionary progress, in which a modern “industrial society” would replace the “militant society” of the past and bring about greater stability. Although these were ideal types as opposed to being specific kinds of societies, he tended towards a view of the age in which he lived as most closely corresponding to his vision of an organic social entity in which the parts function to maintain the whole.

Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) can be considered to be the first social theorist to establish social theory as a social scientific endeavor. Although both Comte and Spencer used the term sociology to describe their work, they were not professional social scientists, but public intellectuals. Durkheim was the first professor of sociology, and developed in his major early work, *The Division of Labour in Society*, a systemic theory of modern society, which for him was an objective entity. Like Spencer he operated with a dichotomous typology of societies, the traditional and the modern. In the transition from traditional societies to modern societies “mechanical” forms of integration (which are characterized by the collective consciousness with its strong focus on the group and a direct or “mechanical” relationship between value systems and social actors) are replaced by “organic” forms of solidarity (which are characterized by individualism and cooperation, and are expressed in generalized norms as opposed to substantive values). In this work, published in 1893, he argued that modern societies are highly differentiated and products of the “division of labor.” Modernity comes about with the shift from social integration through family and religion to integration through membership of occupational groups and the interdependence of these groups, as well as through educational meritocracy. The cultural structures of modern society are restitutive as opposed to being repressive, as in traditional societies, and provide individuals with possibilities for mutual cooperation.

Durkheim was schooled in French philosophy and, like Comte and Hegel, he was greatly concerned with the moral foundations of society. But, like many thinkers of his time, he believed modern society was in crisis. The specter of social and political disorder was foremost in his mind, as reflected in the disaster of the Franco-Prussian war, the Paris Commune, and the Dreyfus Affair. His social theory was an attempt to explain sociologically the modern experience of crisis in way that avoided some of the more speculative diagnoses of the age that were a feature of the culturally pessimistic *fin-de-siècle*. It is in this context that Durkheim’s concern with “anomie” can be placed. Modern societies are prone to anomie, the breakdown in social cohesion and the production of social pathologies such as normlessness and suicide. His study on suicide in 1897 can be seen as a comment on the malaise of modernity, and may have been influenced by the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer’s 1851 essay on suicide. Durkheim was influenced by Schopenhauer’s pessimistic thought, which pointed to another side to modernity than that of the Enlightenment and the liberal and positivistic ideas that he generally embraced. For instance, his notion of “collective representations” is directly inspired by Schopenhauer’s earlier work *The World as Will and Representation*. But, despite the prevailing popularity of German cultural pessimism, Durkheim

was a French positivist, a rationalist, and, most of all, a pragmatist. He hoped for social reform and reconstruction based on moral individualism and political liberalism.

Max Weber (1864–1920) was influenced by Nietzsche, who led him to the idea of the “ethical irrationality” of the world, and was deeply preoccupied with the problem of meaning in an intellectualized and rationalized world. Like Durkheim he was interested in the moral foundations of society, but unlike Durkheim he gave a greater emphasis to meaning, and was especially interested in the ways people give meaning to their material interests. The guiding theme in his work concerned the process of cultural rationalization, by which cultural systems of meaning become increasingly rationalized as a result of their internal dynamics. Weber examined and documented this, from the rationalization of magic to the emergence of world religions to modern materialism. In *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, published in 1904/5, Weber illustrated how religious values, and particularly the quest for salvation, lead to a particular attitude to the profane world of material wealth and work. The uniqueness of the West was that Christianity, particularly in its Calvinistic variant, involved a tension with the material world, and in order to ensure salvation in the next world Christianity, unlike other world religions, required an ethic of world mastery, both intellectual and material. The Protestant Reformation brought about a certain coincidence of values and interests, in that Protestantism entailed a greater emphasis on gaining salvation through the mastery of the material world. In this way, Christianity was a dynamic force in bringing about social change and ultimately in preparing the way for modern science and capitalism. Weber did not operate with a simple model of mono-causality. Rationalization operates in all spheres: law, science, music, economy, religion. It was one of his major claims that the “methodic manner of life” characteristic of capitalism and reformed Christianity had spread into all areas of life, leading to the emergence of a bureaucratic individualism and the loss of meaning in “the iron cage” of modernity.

The key to his interpretation of modernity is the notion of the “paradox of rationalism,” namely the thesis that the Western quest for meaning generated a rationalized, meaningful order which destroyed the very possibility of meaning. The more the Protestant ethic rationalized the world for spiritual meaning, the more it eliminated meaning from it and ultimately disenchanting it. This paradox gave rise to two central conflicts. The first was the conflict of modern value systems. The loss of a unified world-view and the emergence of autonomous orders of science, morality, and art leads to a conflict of different value systems none of which can enchant the world but within each meaning can be found. The result of this is the recognition that modernity is based on “ethical irrationality.” A second conflict between different orders of rationality can be detected in Weber’s social theory of modernity. This is the conflict between value rationality and instrumental rationality, or in other words the conflict between culture in general and the instrumentalized orders of law, economy, and the state which seem to be breaking free from cultural value systems. For Weber, the last traces of enchantment are to be found in charisma (in public life) and the erotic (in private life). In his famous lecture “Science as a Vocation,” delivered as the Russian Revolution broke out and as Germany descended into chaos at the end of World War I, there is the suggestion that the modern world

has not only lost the certainty of religion but may also be undermining its own presuppositions.

As a social theorist, Weber set out to explain the modern world. He wished to explain the uniqueness of the modern West, where capitalism had become the dominant ethic. What both Durkheim and Weber offered was a general social theory of modern society, and one that was underpinned by new methodological approaches for social science (see CHAPTER 3). The theme of crisis was common to both theorists, as it was with Marx. This was also the case with Ferdinand Tönnies, who in a classic work published in 1887, *Community and Society*, saw the modern world in terms of the demise of community, which signifies the cohesive and organic world of traditional social relations, while “society” signifies the fragmented world of mediated social relations. With the coming of society, there was a danger of a return to the Hobbesian state of nature.

No discussion of classical European social theory can be complete without mention of Georg Simmel (1858–1918). One of his central concepts, the “tragedy of culture,” gives expression to the growing pessimism about modernity that was a characteristic of European thought in the early twentieth century. In essays written during World War I, “The Concept and Tragedy of Culture” and “The Conflict in Modern Culture,” he looked at modernity as a dualism of “objective” and “subjective” culture. He argued that culture is divided between two forms, the subjective creation of culture – in the sense of emanating from the creative imagination of an individual – and the tendency for culture to take on an objective existence of its own. By the tragedy of culture he meant the separation of these two domains of culture, with the resulting loss of autonomy and creativity as a result of rationalization, which was leading to the objectivation of culture. In an earlier and famous essay, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” Simmel argued that the modern city is where objective culture develops at the cost of subjective culture. One of the distinctive features of the metropolis is the experience of distance between people. In the metropolis the money economy becomes all-dominant and shapes social relations, bringing about the fragmentation of experience. This was the theme of his major work, *The Philosophy of Money*, published in 1907, in which Marx’s notion of alienation became the central motif in his account of modernity as one of the fragmentation of human experience. Comparing Simmel to Durkheim, we also find the theme of differentiation, which was the title of a book he published in 1890, *On Social Differentiation*. However, unlike Durkheim, he tended to view the cultural expressions of modernity in terms of fragmentation, and in particular the fragmentation of subjective meaning. Simmel’s legacy for social theory was the application of concepts in Marx, Weber, whom he influenced, and Durkheim to the world of social consumption, sociability, and urban life, for in Simmel’s sociology consumption is more typical of modern urban life than is production, as in Marx. He extended the analysis of social relations to the micro level of sociability, as in his famous analysis of the dyad and the triad, and made important links with the wider context of modernity. Simmel’s influence on social theory has been widely recognized since the so-called cultural turn in the social sciences in the 1980s. However, following his death his ideas exerted a major influence on classical American sociology – in particular the urban sociology of the Chicago School – for the Americans were more receptive

to his work, and that of Weber, than they were to that of either Marx or Durkheim.

In conclusion, we can say that modernity, conceived of in terms of the crisis of the Enlightenment project of the emancipation of the individual, was the context for the emergence of classical social theory, which can be seen as an attempt to explore the continuity and rupture that modernity has brought. The three great founders of social theory – Marx, Durkheim, and Weber – built on earlier Enlightenment social thought to produce systematic social scientific analyses of the condition of modernity. The themes that dominated their work were, respectively, differentiation/anomie, rationalization/disenchantment, and commodification/alienation. Their works, which have shaped the sociological heritage, were both diagnostic and explanatory.

SOCIAL THEORY AND THE DISENCHANTMENT WITH MODERNITY

As noted in the foregoing account of social theory, the theme of crisis and a certain cultural pessimism was present in the work of many theorists. This was to take on an enhanced momentum after the end of World War I, which marked a watershed in European social theory. Durkheim died in 1917, Simmel in 1918, and Weber in 1920. The tone of pessimism that was present in their work was balanced by their concern with a systematic analysis of modernity and an attempt to develop a theory of society. Unfortunately, Simmel succumbed to the pathology of war and, influenced like many thinkers of the age by nationalism and aestheticism, he welcomed the war as a liberating event capable of overcoming the “tragedy of culture” and creating a new “form.” Both Weber and Durkheim became identified with national policy. Early twentieth-century European social theory, unlike American social theory, which will be considered in the next section, was influenced by three anti-Enlightenment thinkers, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). In their work the theme of disenchantment with modernity led to a redirection of social theory away from the classical tradition as represented by Marx, Weber, and Durkheim to one that took more the form of a pessimistic diagnosis of the age in which cultural and psychological factors played a significant role.

Nietzsche was influential in the rejection of the very premises of the Enlightenment as an emancipatory project, namely the certainty of knowledge and the possibility of a rationally organized political order. Rejecting the collectivist ideologies of Marxism and nationalism, he argued for a personal ethics of resistance – often called nihilism – which rejects all absolute values. Although less intentionally anti-Enlightenment, Freud demonstrated that beneath the unity and coherence of personality there are the deep irrational forces of the unconscious, where the prehistorical conflicts of civilization are played out. One of his central insights was that human beings have a tendency to love the object of aggression and that all of civilization is based on a primordial act of violence. However, Freud’s legacy for social theory ultimately went beyond the pessimistic cultural criticism that was a feature of his later work, and he was a major figure in influencing the interpretive or hermeneutical

tradition in later social theory. The significance of Heidegger for social theory was his emphasis on language, not reason, as the foundation or ontology of human society. His philosophy, as outlined in his major work *Being and Time* (1927), resulted in a return to Presocratic Greek thinking, as well as an interest in the works of Nietzsche and a critique of technology, leading to a rejection of the Enlightenment heritage. All three thinkers displayed a strong emphasis on subjectivity and a general suspicion of collective action, as well as a liberal political ideology. It is possible to speak of a turn to subjectivity in social theory. However, none of these theorists attempted to enter into a constructive debate with classical sociologists.

It was the main achievement of the so-called Frankfurt School to make precisely the connection between the turn to subjectivity and the objective analysis of modernity from the perspective of a theory of society that was broadly in line with the emancipatory project of a normatively grounded social theory of human emancipation. The Frankfurt School theorists, who can be considered to be methodologically Marxists, represented an important strand within Western Marxism and modern German philosophy (Held 1980; Jay 1996). They continued the sociological tradition by linking it with psychology and the cultural and philosophical analysis of modernity, to lay the foundations for a new approach that would bring social theory towards a new kind of critical interpretation of the symbolic structure of power in modernity. Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and Herbert Marcuse, the principal representatives of what was to become known as critical theory, sought to reconcile Marxism with the approaches of Freud, Weber, and more generally the emerging discipline of sociology. The thesis of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, originally published in 1944 in response to the Holocaust, was that human history is the story of the struggle between nature and myth. Enlightenment, which they project back to the beginning of civilization, is the expression of the mastery of nature which is also the mastery of fear, but it is achieved through instrumental reason, which becomes a new kind of domination. Accordingly, as society gains more and more mastery over nature, it must exercise new forms of domination over subjectivity: the price of mastery over nature is domination over the self. This is the "dialectic of Enlightenment": the internalization of domination. The ultimate expression of civilization was totalitarianism in its Nazi as well as in its Soviet manifestations and, in their view, modern mass society. Popular culture, entertainment, or the "culture industry" were explained as the continuation of authoritarianism by other means. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the gas chamber, not Weber's "iron cage," is the motif modernity.

While the Frankfurt School did establish the foundations of a critical social theory of society and re-established a link between sociology and psychology, which Weber had opposed, the particular approach they adopted had its limits. The tendency to reduce modern society to its negative dimensions limited the wider application of their insights. The Holocaust was the central preoccupation of their theory of society, which they saw in terms of a total system of power in which emancipation could only be contemplative and largely embodied in its aesthetic expressions beyond direct political application.

With the Frankfurt School the cultural turn in social theory is most vividly apparent. Western Marxism, more generally, also reflected a turn away from an exclusive preoccupation with political economy to a concern with culture. This is evident in

the work of Antonio Gramsci, Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Ernst Bloch and the later generation of western Marxists, such as Henri Lefebvre, Lucien Goldmann, and Louis Althusser. Western Marxism, which marked a return to Hegel and has often been called Hegelian Marxism, was a response to the failure of proletarian revolution and the aftermath of the Russian Revolution of 1918. If Marx's writings were a response to the aftermath of the French Revolution of 1789, twentieth-century Marxism was a reflection of the fate of revolution in the wake of 1918 and, in western Europe, the rise of nationalism and fascism, developments which called into question the emancipatory project of modernity.

The attention given here to Western Marxism and the project of a critical theory of society should not detract from the conservative tradition in early to mid-twentieth-century social theory as well as to other kinds of social theory, such as those of thinkers as diverse as Karl Mannheim, Karl Jaspers, Norbert Elias, and Hannah Arendt, who in their different ways all attempted to offer an interpretation of the modern world. European social thought in the period from 1918 to 1945 was dominated by a sense of the decline of the political, to use Arendt's expression, and the disappearance of the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment in the rising mass society. Common to many of the critiques from both the right and the left was the critique of mass society. This was as much apparent in the writings of the Frankfurt School as it was in books such as José Ortega y Gasset's *The Revolt of the Elites* in 1930 and in Oswald Spengler's work of 1918, *The Decline of the West*. In general, this was a period in which European social theory underwent a process of disorientation in which the visions of the classical sociologists were lost amidst a variety of culturally oriented diagnoses of the age. It was in the United States during this period that the foundations were laid for the revival of social theory. Indeed, many American theorists had studied in Germany, and when they returned to the United States the classical tradition became wedded to American intellectual tradition to produce new approaches.

Two classical Italian social theorists of this period, Pareto and Mosca, became important transmitters of European social thought in the United States and influencing sociologists as diverse as Talcott Parsons and C. Wright Mills in their studies on power and elites in American society. Vilfredo Pareto (1848–1923) and Gaetano Mosca (1858–1941) shared the disenchantment with modernity and contempt for mass society that was a feature of European social thought in the early twentieth century.

CLASSICAL AMERICAN SOCIAL THEORY

The dominant influence in American social thought was pragmatism. The main representatives of American pragmatism were Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), who can be credited with introducing the term, William James (1842–1910), and Charles Dewey (1859–1952). None of these was a social theorist as such; they were primarily philosophers whose impact on American social theory has been considerable. Other sources of American social theory were American liberal theory – in particular the constitutional theory of Madison, Hamilton, and Jefferson – and German idealism, including both neo-Kantian idealism and Hegelianism. The

constitutional theorists provided the basis of a political conception of society in terms of a liberal polity based on a shared morality, while the pragmatists established an alternative to a purely liberal conception of society that entailed a rejection of utilitarianism. Pragmatism had a huge influence on sociology and social theory, not only in the United States but also in Europe. Indeed, Weber, for all his skepticism of the United States, was influenced by pragmatism, as Jack Barbalet has argued (see CHAPTER 10). Barbalet is also correct to claim that pragmatism is not exhausted by George Herbert Mead's particular symbolic interactionism, but has a far more extensive reach. Pragmatism in sociology can be seen as an attempt to develop a specifically social theory that avoids many of the assumptions of political theory, with its utilitarian and liberal assumptions. The central aim of pragmatism was to link ideas to action.

Peirce was the founder of pragmatism, a term he coined in 1877, but it was William James who can be credited with developing pragmatism, which he did in a strongly psychological direction. Along with Freud, he was the most important psychologist of the period. His work, more than Peirce's, lent itself to social scientific applications since it made a connection with the emotions (Barbalet 2001). It was his theory of emotions that was of particular relevance to social theorists. This figured in his work on religion, as in *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1905). Both Weber and Durkheim, in their own writings on religion, were aware of, and influenced by, his work on emotions. The influence of pragmatism is especially apparent in Durkheim.⁴ However, Weber was opposed to what they regarded as the individualistic orientation of psychology and preferred to emphasize the cognitive and functional aspects of culture against its emotional aspects. Yet the sociological approach they adopted, which entailed the analysis of religious ideas in terms of particular forms of action, reflected one of the core premises of pragmatist theory. James's influence on American social thought had a more positive impact than the social psychology of Freud, whose influence tended to focus on destructive forces. He was also a major influence on George Herbert Mead and numerous other American sociologists, such as Thorstein Veblen and Charles Cooley. Later American pragmatists, such as Richard Rorty and Richard Bernstein, have relied on the early pragmatists. John Dewey, for instance, was a source of inspiration for Rorty's anti-foundationalism.

Of the classical American sociologists it was George Herbert Mead (1863–1931) who was the most significant in taking up the pragmatist heritage. Mead studied in Germany, where he worked with one of the leading neo-Kantian philosophers, Wilhelm Dilthey, and sought to link German social thought to American pragmatism. This was the basis of symbolic interactionism, which offered an entirely new understanding of subjectivity as socially constituted. In his best-known work, *Mind, Self and Society*, published in 1934, Mead advocated an understanding of the Self as intersubjective, constructed in interaction with others through such mechanisms as social control, roles, and the generalized Other. The significance of Mead's approach was that it made interaction more central to sociological analysis than action. It also pointed to an alternative to consciousness and experience as the basis of social analysis. The interactionist conception of the self broke from the individualist self in liberal theory as well as the collectivist self in Marxism, and opened sociology to new ways of looking at social relations in terms of a social subjectivity.

The pragmatist influence in his sociological theory is reflected in the concern, central to his work, with a universalistic morality with which society could be better equipped to deal with its problems. This aspiration toward a public morality, sometimes called a “civil religion,” was a distinctive feature of American social theory which, unlike European social theory, was less concerned with the declining significance of the Enlightenment.

American social theory, originally shaped by the humanistic and liberal ethos of pragmatism as in Mead’s symbolic interactionism, became more and more influenced by the structural functionalism of Talcott Parsons (1902–79), who dominated social theory in the United States and world-wide after 1945. Parsons was the first major social theorist to provide a synthesis of classical social theory, which had fragmented into the traditions represented by Marx, Durkheim, and Weber. The task that Parsons set himself in his first major work, *The Structure of Social Action*, published in 1937, was to develop precisely such a synthesis of classical social theory. Indeed with Parsons the very notion of a classical sociological tradition begins. It was his thesis that classical social theory can be read as a convergence of theoretical traditions leading from economic theory to sociological theory. In this work, Parsons sought to integrate the approaches of Weber and Durkheim with what he called the voluntaristic theories, such as those of Vilfredo Pareto and Alfred Marshall. The problem for Parsons was to see how values, as in Durkheim’s sociology, and action, as represented by Weber, can be linked to interests. Marx did not figure in this theory. The economic theories that Parsons drew from were those of Pareto and Marshall. The work was significant in establishing the recognition of sociological theory as having a contribution distinct from that of economic theory.

The central theme in all of Parsons’s work was the question: how is social order possible? In his early work, which was heavily influenced by economic theory, the question of social order was posed in terms of the limitations of restraint and choice. Unlike many of the European sociologists he did not have a background in philosophy and was less preoccupied with the legacy of history. The twin figures of Marx and Freud that were so much present in twentieth-century European social theory were absent from his work. However, Parsons did acknowledge the significance of Freud in the second edition of *The Structure of Social Action*. For Parsons, the most basic questions of human society were those of Hobbes, but the answer had to be more normative than utilitarian. His mature works – *The Social System* and *Towards a General Theory of Action*, both published in 1951 – were much more Durkheimian in the emphasis that they gave to normative integration. In these works from the early 1950s, Parsons abandoned voluntarism in favor of functionalism. While European social theorists – as is best illustrated by some of Weber’s ideas and those of the Frankfurt School – believed that normative integration was being undermined by ideological distortions and instrumental rationalization by an all-powerful capitalism, Parsons – as an American liberal, and optimistic about the future of society – was convinced that the functional differentiation brought about by modernity was firmly regulated by normative mechanisms, and that a kind of functional unity existed that guaranteed the reproducibility of society. This can be seen as the expression of “American exceptionalism,” the view that America’s path to modernity was able to avoid the disasters that befell Europe.

Parsons's vision of modernity was one that recast the classical European notion of modernity in terms of a theory of modernization, the essence of which was a view of the progressive unfolding of the structures of a functionally integrated society. Thus, while European social theory culminated in a certain resignation to dissensus, Parsons had established a social theory based on a belief in consensual integration. Mention can be made in this context of another leading American social theorist, Daniel Bell, whose book *The End of Ideology*, published in 1962, epitomized the ideological assumptions of Parsonian theory, namely the view that post-war American society had eliminated conflict in the creation of a political culture based on the relatively stable values of liberal democracy and personal achievement. Functional structuralism provided sociology with what it needed to gain recognition as a social science, namely an elaborate conceptual system as well as a general theory of society. None of the other classical sociologists quite succeeded in this, and their various approaches only gained partisan supporters. Parsons, by contrast, commanded almost world-wide influence in the post-1945 period. Undoubtedly structural functionalism was a reflection of the political context of the period in which the US was able to project its vision of society onto the rest of the world. The models of society present in European social theory were generally judged to be less pertinent to an age that had witnessed two European wars.

The Parsonian synthesis of classical social theory was not to last, despite Robert Merton's revision of some of its central concepts. Merton (1910–2003) aimed to correct some of the shortcomings of structural functionalism, for instance the absence of conflict and dysfunctionality. One of his most important contributions was the introduction of the notion of dysfunction. Lewis Coser (1913–2003) developed conflict theory, which was also an important corrective of structural functionalism's concern with macro-level analysis. The sociology of knowledge, associated with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Knowledge*, published in 1966, presented a challenge to the Parsonian orthodoxy and opened the way for an approach which rehabilitated the neglected figure of Karl Mannheim, as well as an more hermeneutic and phenomenologically oriented sociological theory deriving from Alfred Schutz. Symbolic interactionism ceased to be a marginal preoccupation, and its resurgence signaled a general shift from macrosociological theorizing towards microtheorizing within American sociology.

By the mid-1960s, Parsons's influence had waned, challenged by the resurgence of Marxist thinking and critics of modernization theory, attentive to the multiple paths to modernity. In the United States, C. Wright Mills – inspired by both the Frankfurt School in exile and pragmatism – had introduced Marxist theory, and in 1970 Alvin Gouldner, in *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*, had declared the need for a new radical sociology to replace the Parsonian orthodoxy. Critics of Parsonian functionalism, ranging from Alvin Gouldner to Western Marxists such as Herbert Marcuse, did much to undermine its dominance. Moreover, the ideological presuppositions of the theory – the idea of a society based on consensual values and functional unity – was no longer credible in an age that was entering cultural revolution. The student rebellion, Vietnam, the civil rights movement, the counter-culture and feminism, and nationalist liberation movements in the developing world all questioned the assumptions of structural functionalism, which was further challenged by the global crisis of capitalism in the early 1970s. When Parsons came to

write one of his last works, *The American University*, published in 1973, structural functionalism had become an outmoded system of thought, unable to deal with social protest.

With the decline of Parsonian structural functionalism American social theory began to lose its influence. Merton brought social theory in the direction of grounded theorizing around, what he called, “middle-range theories,” which were addressed to empirical social research. This move away from “Grand Theory” was enhanced by the influence of neo-positivist theory in social science, such as the school of thought represented by Carl Hempel. While Jeffrey Alexander developed a sociological theory that claimed to be neo-functionalism and Randall Collins advanced conflict theory, much of what was to become American social theory came from outside sociology. Hannah Arendt, for instance, while operating from the wider context of social and political thought, is clearly one of the central figures in modern social theory. This is also the case with regard to other influential theorists such as Barrington Moore. Developments in political theory, around the liberal communitarian debate, as well as in cultural theory, offered new reference points for social theory. However, what has remained as the distinctive feature of the classical tradition in the United States is a grounded kind of sociological theorizing that abandons the attempt to develop a comprehensive theory of society. This is in contrast to the diagnostic tradition in European social theory. However, both European and American classical social theory were both decidedly Western in that they presupposed a Western conception of the world and, with hardly any exceptions, did not subject that view of the world to much critical scrutiny. Indeed, the critical tradition was mostly confined to the concerns of the modern Western world.

CONCLUSION

From the late 1960s, social theory in Europe enjoyed a resurgence and the plurality of traditions that it generated challenged the very possibility of a theoretical orthodoxy; for instance, the structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Louis Althusser, Raymond Aron’s sociology of industrial society, the work of historically oriented thinkers such as Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias, varieties of post-structuralism and hermeneutics, as well as the work of Giddens, Castoriadis, Touraine, Bourdieu, and Habermas. A feature of these developments was the growth of social theory outside sociology.

Within sociology in the post-1945 period there were important developments that can be seen as establishing a new phase in the classical tradition. In the US phenomenology became increasingly influential as a result of the work of Alfred Schutz, a philosopher of social science who emigrated to the United States. In Britain the philosopher Peter Winch published his influential *The Idea of a Social Science* in 1958, introducing a combination of Weber and Wittgenstein to sociology. Also in Britain, T. H. Marshall published his seminal essay “Citizenship and Social Class” in 1950, which provided a theoretical framework for citizenship theory. In France, Raymond Aron revised the older theories of capitalism in his work on industrial society.

From the 1950s Weberian sociology enjoyed widespread appeal, as is evident in the work of Lewis Coser, S. N. Eisenstadt, and W. G. Runciman. Coser linked structural functionalism with conflict theory, while Eisenstadt introduced cultural issues into modernization and Runciman's selectionist paradigm offered an alternative to the evolutionist assumptions of modernization theory. However, the major developments in social theory that were to shape post-classical social theory came largely from continental Europe in the 1970s: the social theories of Habermas, Touraine, Bourdieu, Luhmann, and Foucault to mention some of the most significant ones.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a revised and more concise version of chapter 1 in the 2nd edn. of B. S. Turner (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Theory*.
- 2 On the concept of modernity in social theory, see Delanty (1999), Wagner (1994).
- 3 For some useful historical surveys see Abraham (1973), Aron (1965, 1967), Bottomore and Nisbet (1978), Callinicos (1999), Camic (1997), Coser (1977), Craib (1997), Levine (1994), Nisbet (1970), Ritzer (1996), Swidgewood (1991), and Szacbi (1979).
- 4 See the volume edited by Allcock (Durkheim 1983).

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