

GRAND THEORIES AND THEIR CRITIQUES: FROM C. WRIGHT MILLS TO POST MODERNISM

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Abstract

The paper explores what constitute grand theories and their place in sociological theorizing. It also tried to distinguish sociological theorizing from social thought. The two main theories functionalism and conflict theory with their main tenets was discussed. It also explains the main tenets of Mills. In all, the paper concludes that there is no one view of looking at the world. Each of the views must be examined in relation to the others in order to understand the meaning and objective truth.

During human history few of the actions were based on verified knowledge, for people through the ages have been guided mainly by folklore, habit and guess work. Until a few centuries ago, very few people accepted the idea that the natural world can be found out by systematic observation of the natural world itself, rather than by consulting oracles, ancestors or by intuition. This new idea created the modern world. (Website).

One can ask what science is. Science may be defined in at least two ways:

1. Is a body of organized, verified knowledge secured through scientific investigation?
2. Is a method of study whereby a body of organized verified knowledge is discovered?

If the first definition is accepted, the sociology is a science to the extent that it develops a body of organized, verified knowledge based on scientific investigation. Sociology to the extent forsakes myth, folklore and wishful thinking and bases its conclusions on scientific evidence. As a method of study sociology is a science in that it uses scientific methods. All natured phenomena can be studied scientific methods. Any kind of behaviour-whether of atoms, animals etc is a proper field for scientific study.

The Development of Sociology

Sociology is the youngest of the social sciences. Auguste Comte in France coined the word "sociology" in his positive philosophy, published in 1838. He believed

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that a science of sociology should be based on systematic observation and classification, not on authority and speculation. Hebert Spencer in England published his *Principles of Sociology* in 1876. He applied the theory of organic evolution to human society and developed a grand theory of "social evolution" which was widely accepted for several decades and is today regaining a partial acceptance in a modified form. (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008).

Sociology is the scientific study of human group, and social behaviour (Aderson & Taylor 2009; Rizer & Goodman 2004, website). It provides tools for understanding how and why society functions, impact of social institution on individual lives, and the challenges of social interaction between individuals and society. Subject matters of sociology ranges from family life to organizations, crime to education, the shared beliefs of a common culture etc. Few fields have such a broad and exciting scope.

Sociology enables us to see the world in a new light. In a country such as United States where individual is celebrated, it is easy to forget that behaviour and feeling is socially produced. Sociology helps people to liberate themselves Peter Berger stated that "Sociology can help people to take charge of their lives by making them aware of their situation in society and the forces acting upon them... By discovering the workings of society, they gain an understanding of this process takes place".

Sociology reasoning predates the foundation of the discipline. Some analysis has origins in the common stock of western knowledge and philosophy as far back of the time of ancient Greek Philosopher Plato. The collection of information from a sample of individual (survey) can be traced back to the Domesday Book in 1086 (Halsey, 2004). There is evidence of early sociology in Medieval Islam. Some consider Ibn Khaldum, a 14th Century Arab Islamic Scholar from North Africa to have been the first sociology; his *Mugaddimah* was perhaps the first work to advance social-scientific reasoning on social cohesion and social conflict (Abdullah, 2007, Akhtar, 1997).

Comte used this term to describe a new way of looking at society (Macionis, Gerber, John & Linda, 2010). He had earlier used the term "social physics", but had subsequently been appropriated by others. Comte tried to unify history, psychology and economics through the scientific understanding of the social realm. Shortly after the malaise of the French Revolution, he proposed that social ills could be remedied through sociological positivism, an epistemological approach outlined in *The Course in Positive Philosophy* (1830-1842) and a *General view of Positivism* (1848). Comte believed that a positivist stage would mark the final era, after conjectural theological and metaphysical phases in the progression human understanding in observing the theory and observation in science.

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Talcott Person one of the greatest evolutionalist wrote a great deal in his principal publications such as *The structure of Social Action* (1937), *Towards a General Theory of Action*, (1951), *Social Structure and Personality* (1964) etc. His aim was to provide a conceptual structure for the whole sociology which would serve also to interpret all the social sciences. He started with the theory of social action, which is the relationship between actors and features of their environment, to which they give meaning. The most important features of the environment are other people which suggest that social interaction, in which actors have to take notice of the actions, wishes and aims of others, should be the focus of inquiry. In these interactions, norms and values are critical as they regulate and make predictable the behaviour of others. Socialization ensures that individuals internalize norms and values as they grew up. Parsons treats personality and social systems as complementary, though in his analysis the latter determine the former.

Parsons notes that social interaction has a systematic character, hence his use of the term social system. The concept that bridges social actions and social system is that of pattern variables. These pattern variables structure any system of interaction. Parsons used evolutionary theory to describe the progression of changes in society. A number of criticisms have been leveled at Parsons:

1. this is a grand theory of little empirical use
2. he gives too much importance to values and norms
3. he does not pay enough attention to social conflict
4. he is unable to reconcile action theory and system, and in effect sees individual action as structurally determined
5. his functionalism involves teleology

All those founders of sociology were basically social philosophers. They proclaimed that sociology should collect, organize and classify factual data, and derive sound social theories from these facts, but their own method was to think out a grand system of theory and seek facts to support it.

A Frenchman, Emile Durkheim gave the notable scientific methodology in sociology in his *Rules of Sociological Method* published in 1895. He outlined methodology pursued in his study of suicide, instead of speculating upon the causes of suicide, he first planned his research design and then collected a large mass of data on the characteristics of people who commit suicide and then derived a theory of suicide from these data. Sociology was becoming a body of scientific knowledge with its theories based upon scientific observation rather than upon armchair speculation.

The Evolutionary Perspective

This is the earliest theoretical perspective in sociology. Based on the work of Auguste Comte (1798 – 1857) and Herbert Spencer (1820 – 1903), it seemed to offer a

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satisfying explanation of how human societies originated and grew. Sociologist using contradiction of Comte and Spencer can now compare the patterns of change and development in different societies such as Chinese communism with Russian communism or the effects of industrialization upon developing countries and developed nations.

The Interactionist Perspective

This suggests no grand theories of society, since "society" the state and social institutions are conceptual abstractions, while only people and their interactions can be studied directly.

Proponents such as G.H. Mead (1863 – 1931) and C.H. Cooley (1846 – 1929) concentrated upon this interaction between individuals and groups. They noted that people interact mainly through symbols, which include signs, gestures and most importantly through written and spoken words. A word has no inherent meaning. It is simply a noise, but it becomes a word when people reach agreement of this noise that it carries a special meaning. Thus, yes, no, go, come and many other sounds became symbols as a meaning is attached to each.

The Functionalist Perspective

In this perspective, the society is seen as an organized network of cooperating groups operating in a fairly orderly manner according to a set of rules and values shared by most members. Society is seen as a stable system with a tendency toward equilibrium i.e. a tendency to maintain a balanced, harmoniously operating system. Proponents are Talcott Parsons (1973) and Robert Merton (1957), each group or institution fulfils certain functions and persists because is functional. Thus, the school educates children, prepares workers, etc.

The Conflict Perspective

The perspective owes much to the works of Karl Marx and George Simmel. Both of these writers saw conflict as ubiquitous and an ever present and inevitable feature of social system. But while Marx laid emphasis on the divisive nature conflict, Simmel emphasized its integrative functions. Marx located the sources of conflict in the distribution of resources available to members of the social system. Parts of the social system fight to ensure that in the distribution of resources their interests are taken care of. Certain theories in the works of Marx and Simmel have been continued in the writings of Ralf Dahrendorf, Lewis Coser, C. Wright Mills and Riesman.

The main elements of the conflict perspective are as follows, interests are the basic ingredients of social life which makes it necessary for inducement and force to be used to ensure social life. Therefore, division, opposition and hostility are generated by social life. This manifest itself in structured conflict based on sectional interests, the

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resolution of which involves the use of power. Because of these, social systems, contrary to the view of the functionalist perspective are poorly integrated and riddled with contradictions, hence social system tend to change rather than persist as the functionalist perspective claims.

Criticism

- too polemical and of making excessive claims.
- though it makes it possible to see the other side of society which the functionalist perspective does not see.

Functionalist theories are often contrasted with conflict theories which critique the overarching socio-political system or emphasize the inequality of particular groups. The works of Durkheim and Marx epitomize the political, as well as theoretical, disparities between functionalist and conflict thought respectively.

There is this debate in sociology about which of the available perspectives many be used as a guide in theory building the positivists picked up the idea first from Auguste Comte, an early sociologist argued that sociology should view its subject matter the same way that physical and natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, biology perceived their subject matter. According to them, the social world which is the focus of sociology is not different from the world of nature as studied by the natural sciences. They argued that events in the world of nature and the social world are both capable of being observed directly and externally by the use of our senses. They argued that sociology should use the same methods of theory building that are in use in the natural sciences and aim at producing the same kind of theories. Behind this position is the hope that this method will yield for sociology the same kind of results obtained for the natural sciences.

One of the most important rules under this method is that statements which make up theory must be about what are externally observable by our senses, following this rule, the testing of hypothesis derived from such statement against the real world possible. The act testing the statement of theory against the real is one of the characteristic of theory.

The interpretivists on the other hand argued that sociology must select its own particular nature of its subject matter; that way of seeing the world must be deferent from that which guides theory in the natural sciences. Their argument is based on the belief that the world of nature is different from the social and that events in the world of nature are different from social actions.

They point out that social actions have meanings for actors and observers in a way that events in the world of nature do not have. They argued that because **of this**

element of "meanings", sociology cannot and should not aim at producing the same kind of theories found in physics, chemistry etc. This is because the theories of the kind found in physics, chemistry must be made up of statements whose truth can be tested by comparing statements from then with what can be observed externally whereof, "meanings" cannot be observed externally as they are in the mind of the individual actors. Therefore, when the word "theory" is used today in sociological literature, in a majority of cases basically positivistic view of the word is assumed.

What is Scientific Theory?

Theorizing is a mental activity which attempts to formulate ideas which help scientists to explain which help scientists to explain why events occur the way they do. The product of such activity is a scientific theory. All scientific theories have four elements namely - concepts, variables, statement and format (Turner, 1978 .p.2)

Sociological Theory

Ideally sociological scientific theorizing is yet to mature. In sociology today there is hardly a general body of sociological theory which has been widely validated or accepted. Early sociologists like Comte did believed that they had discovered some fundamental social laws or theories. These are general referred to as the laws of social evolution. Nonetheless, this so called "law of evolution have produced useful attempts at social classification and analysis of the process of social change.

At this point, distinction should be made between social thought and sociological theory. Social thought relates to any body of views about human relations. These views may be more or less systematic, but they are not put to vigorous empirical testing by those who advance them.

Sociological theories on the other hand are devoted to explaining and describing social relations as they actually are, have occurred rather than as they ought to be (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008).

Ezeh (2010) noted that a theory which aims at explaining society in totality has been termed grand theory. Grand theory a term coined by Mills to refer to disapproved sociological theories couched at a very abstract conceptual level, like that of Parsons. Mills an American professor of sociology was highly critical of conventional social science for perpetuating prevailing prejudices regarding power and social inequality. In the Power Elite (1956), he explained the power structure of the United States as an integrated arrays of elites in different spheres.

In the Sociological Imagination (1959) he provided a historical interpretation of the evolution of the social sciences in America and a vigorous polemics against the dominance functionalism and empiricism in sociology.

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Mills called the ability to study the structure of society at the same time as individual's lives the Sociological Imagination (1959). He argued that the Sociological Imagination allowed people to understand their private troubles, in terms of public issues. According to Mills, sociology should be about examining the biography of individuals in the context of history of society (Domhoff, 2005). Mills in his elite theory see society as divided into two (2) main groups. A ruling minority who exercise power through the state and the ruled. It was first developed by two Italian sociologists Vilfredo Pareto (1848 – 1923) and Gaetano Mosco (1858 – 1911). Both of them saw the elite as inevitable, whereas Pareto and Mosco attempted to provide a general theory to explain the nature and distribution of power in all societies, Mills (1956) presented a less ambitious and less wide ranging revision of elite theory. Unlike the early theorists, Mills did not believe that elite rule was inevitable, whereas Pareto accepted the domination of the masses by elites, Mills condemned elite rule. He saw it as the exploitation of the masses. Though Mills fails to measure power adequately.

Two ideas are at the core of Foucault's methodology – archaeology of knowledge (1966) and genealogy of knowledge (1969). He illustrates this with archaeologist digging up the ruins of a church, only to find that beneath this ruins ... A dominant discourse is the prevailing system of thought, but if examine this dominant thought system carefully, will see a trace of other alternative discourses, other ways of seeing the world that have been nearly lost from sight.

Another aspect of Foucault's idea is genealogy. Genealogy is the study of lineage or one's family tree. Foucault contrast his genealogical approach with historical study. History is in one sense, the accounts of "winners", those whose discourse have become dominant."Genealogy focuses on the runners-up, and the losers and how their discourse came to be lost, suppressed or downgraded. In terms of research, this means that the researcher has to search for clues about suppressed discourses with the current dominant discourses.

Foucault is also interested not only in the dominant discourse, but in the other discourses. In looking at what constitutes the truth or dominant discourse and the things which have been suppressed, Foucault moved to his second approach which is power and knowledge. It is usually argued that power is a negative force that is used to hide knowledge from people. For Foucault, power has a positive effect. Some of the implications of this for research is that this might involve attempting to discern the dominant discourse and other potential discourse which have been suppressed.

The Exercise of Power/Knowledge

Foucault believed that power is exercised rather than possessed. Thus, Foucault sees most of the views of power by early theorists as inadequate because they are too limited in scope. Marxism is too limited because it only focuses on class relationships

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of power. The elite theory are inadequate because they concentrate on power exercised by state. None of them looks at power in the early day activities of people and the commonly used discourses involved in interaction.

Postmodernism and New Social Movements

Baudrillard (1983) advanced the most extreme postmodern view of power. His position is that signs such as words and visual images no longer represent reality. Instead, signs have become totally detached from reality and indeed disguises the fact that reality no longer exists. Baudrillard believed that real power has disappeared into a system of signs which is based around simulacra – sign which has no relationship to an actual reality.

He made a sweeping generalization in that he did not define power neither did he evaluate his claim that power has disappeared.

Liotard associates postmodernism with the decline of metanarratives. By this, he means that people no longer place their faith in Big – all embracing theories about how the world works or about society. Lyotard sees knowledge as the main source of power in postmodern societies.

People lose their faith that any one metanarrative can provide comprehensive knowledge. He is aware that power can be exercised through coercion but sees such power as less important than that exercised by those who possess the most useful knowledge.

Derrida, a French writer has had a great influence on post modern feminism. His idea was derived from linguistics – the analysis of language. By questioning the nature of language, Derrida opens up a whole range of implication of the study of society. Derrida argued that language was a self-contained system of signifiers – signifiers referred not to some independent reality but to other signifiers. Thus, the word "dog" can only be understood with reference to other words or signifiers such as "animal", "bark" and so on. That words are different from the things to which they refer. This abstract analysis of language leads Derrida to be highly suspicious of any claims to have established the truth. Since language cannot truly represent an objective reality, claims to absolute truth cannot be accepted.

Derrida argues that existing belief systems are based upon the use of binary oppositions – that is, they are based upon a belief in pairs of opposites. Usually one is suppressed while the other is brought to the fore and regarded as superior. Thus, good is seen as superior to evil, activity as superior to passivity, and so on. Such binary oppositions are closely connected to ideologies which make strong distinction between what is desired and what is not. These can be undermined based on the process of deconstruction. (Haralambos & Holborn, 2008).

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Deconstruction involves showing how the favoured term only has a **meaning** in contrast with its opposite. By turning pairs of opposites against one another, he tries to undermine the whole idea that binary opposition should form the basis for thinking about the world.

Deconstruction involves examining texts (anything containing written language), and taking them apart. By this, Derrida believed that inherent contradictions built into knowledge could be revealed. The technique of deconstruction is often used by postmodernists to attack and undermine texts such as sociological theories.

Derrida's work tend to support relativism, that is, denying that anyone truth can be found. Any particular text can be taken apart and shown to have contradictions. By revealing these contradiction, it is possible to show that a text can have different meanings with no one interpretation able to stand as superior to the others.

The meaning of text is also relative because of intertextuality (James, 2011). By this, Derrida implies that texts are given their meaning by referring to meanings in other texts. However, these texts in turn derive their meaning from further texts, so meaning of any single text can never stand alone or be finally determined.

Derrida was accused of adopting complete relativism, that is, knowledge depends upon your point of view, and that one person's view is as good as any other person's view.

In conclusion, what constitutes grand theories have been stated. The difference between social thought and sociological theorizing was distinguished. The main tenets of Mills was explained. In all, there is no one view of looking at the world. Each of the views must be examined in relation to the others in order to arrive at a meaningful, objective truth.

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