

**1****Social Theory:****Should We Forget the Founders?**

Those new to sociology used to be enjoined to follow the advice of Alfred Whitehead (1926) that 'a science that hesitates to forget its founders is lost'. The assumption behind this advice was that sociology should abandon its concern for 'what Marx really said' or 'what Durkheim said about' such and such. Instead, it should – like all other sciences – study the world as it actually is: forget the founders and get on with the science.

Many of those who have reservations about the 'scientific' status of sociology have, nevertheless, taken this advice to heart and have abandoned any concern for understanding or engaging with the formative statements of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. So widespread is the assumption that the founders should be forgotten that Whitehead's advice is rarely repeated today. This abandonment of formative theory induces an amnesia or ignorance about fundamental aspects of sociological analysis. Contemporary theorists frequently cast their work as a 'new approach' or a 'new direction' for social theory, one especially attuned to contemporary conditions. All too often, however, these new ventures have ended up as restatements, in whole or in part, of ideas already well explored by earlier writers. A better acquaintance with the founders, it might be suggested, would have prevented such frequent reinventions of the wheel.

The central claim behind this book is that, contrary to Whitehead's claim, a science that forgets its founders is lost, or is, at least, in considerable difficulties. It is time to rediscover the lasting insights of the early theorists. Those who built the foundations of sociology and established its place at the heart of the social sciences set out a comprehensive framework of ideas that defined, and continue

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to define, the core concerns of the subject. There were, of course, many areas of disagreement and contention among these writers, and their ideas were often presented as if they are mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, their works overlapped around a number of intersecting ideas, and their distinctive theoretical viewpoints were differences of emphasis, variations in focus, or explicit positions in an intellectual division of labour in which all contending theoretical frameworks that stood the empirical test could find a place.

As a result, sociology had available to it, by the first decades of the twentieth century, a clear and systematic conspectus of ideas that provided a working basis for empirical research and for further theoretical investigations. No practising sociologist can afford to ignore this conspectus of ideas. In fact, few did ignore it until recently, and through the middle years of the twentieth century the development of new research went hand in hand with the exploration of the founding statements. A particularly strong position on this was taken by Ronald Fletcher (1971), though he perhaps overstated the level of consensus that there had been among the nineteenth-century theorists.

The massive expansion of sociology from the 1960s brought into the discipline many people from cognate social sciences who invigorated social research with an infusion of new theoretical ideas. Many members of this new generation of sociologists, however, were less familiar with the formative sociological ideas and unintentionally followed Whitehead's advice. Those they trained were also less likely to be taught the ideas of the earlier theorists and, as they entered the profession, they reinforced the emerging emphasis on the overriding need for new theoretical approaches appropriate to contemporary conditions. Correctly recognising that the world had changed since the nineteenth century and that the founders could not be expected to provide us with accounts of these new social conditions, they incorrectly concluded that the founders had *nothing* to contribute to sociological understanding.

In fact, the conspectus of ideas remained as relevant as ever before. One very simple example can illustrate the point being made. Nineteenth-century theorists cannot be expected to provide any accounts of the cultural impact of television or the internet: television was invented only in the 1920s and regular broadcasting did not begin until after the Second World War; and the internet is a technology of the 1990s. The formative concepts of culture and the process of cultural transmission through which meanings are established and identifications built, however, can still provide the central basis on which any form of communication can be understood. The formative theoretical ideas may require modification and extension, but understanding cannot proceed without them.

A recognition of the continuing relevance of the formative period in sociology allows us to identify a far greater continuity in sociological analysis than many are prepared to recognise. Contemporary theories can often be seen as recasting older ideas, building on them and extending them to new areas of application. In the course of this, the inherited ideas – whether or not they are recognised as such – are deepened, elaborated, and enlarged. ‘New directions’ in social theory make sense and prove useful only if we have some appreciation of the old ideas that form the starting point for the change of direction.

Formative ideas, then, play a continuing role as the defining statements of what it is to be sociological, while contemporary theories, through their engagement with this formative knowledge, can move sociological analysis forward. Instead of a succession of novel and incommensurable perspectives, we may be able to identify areas of intellectual progress in which genuine advances in sociological understanding have been made. Such progress becomes apparent if contemporary work is placed in the context of the formative ideas.

This is not to say that all contemporary theory must be seen as either reinventing the wheel or modifying it. There are genuinely new approaches, introducing ideas that were barely considered by the founders. Such work, however, must accommodate itself to existing research based on older ideas that complement its own particular focus of attention. There are also areas of genuine controversy where contemporary theorists substantially disagree with each other and with earlier theorists. It is often remarked, for example, that contemporary sociology is beset by a division between ‘structural’ approaches and ‘action’ approaches. Sociology loses much of its excitement and explanatory purchase if such differences are minimised. An awareness of the formative sociological debates, however, shows that this division was equally important 150 years ago and that the relationship between the two is one of the major areas of continuity in social theory. What emerges from such contextualisation is a realisation that the central issue in this debate has not been the question of which of the two approaches is correct (and which, therefore, should be abandoned), but the question of where the legitimate areas of application for each of them are to be found. Social reality is complex and exhibits both structural and enacted properties.

Continuity and controversy, therefore, characterise the development of sociology, and any overview of social theory must recognise this. My aim has been to produce a book that does justice to both continuity and controversy: rediscovering and consolidating the diverse achievements of the formative theorists as the bedrock for sociological analysis and documenting the areas where formative and contemporary theorists have engaged in genuine and productive debate. I stress

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that different forms of social theory may often be complementary rather than merely contending.

It is important to emphasise that my advocacy of the *complementarity* of sociological approaches does not mean that I advocate their immediate and eclectic synthesis into a single theoretical framework. A genuine synthesis of available bodies of knowledge may be a desirable long-term goal (Scott 1998), but it would be premature and misguided to pursue this goal at the expense of a recognition of prevailing areas of controversy and theoretical disputation.

Indeed, such eclecticism would be unhelpful and unproductive. It would be beset by intellectual contradictions whose discussion would inhibit both empirical research and theoretical advance. Matters would be no better if such a strategy were confined to those theories that had separately withstood empirical testing – however we might envisage that taking place. It is unlikely that such a synthesis could be built and, as there are too many areas in which our sociological understanding is limited, there are too many gaps in our knowledge to make such an effort worthwhile. If a theoretical synthesis is to emerge, it will be many years from now and will result from a gradual process of theoretical accommodation and integration in particular and discrete areas.

There may, however, be further obstacles to both ideas of synthesis and complementarity. Theoretical frameworks are grounded in value differences around which particular sets of concepts are organised. It was Max Weber (1904) who recognised that objectivity in sociology is achieved in the face of the value relevance of its concepts. Liberals, Marxists, feminists, and post-colonialists, for example, identify themselves in relation to varying cultural values and it is these value differences that orient them towards particular topics of investigation and sensitise them towards particular aspects of the problems that they investigate.

In the light of this it would seem ludicrous to suggest that such divergent theoretical frameworks can be treated as complementary to each other. What can be meant by the claim that debates in social theory are marked by considerable continuity and complementarity? Weber recognised that empirically founded research, on whatever value-relevant basis it is constituted, has an equal right to be considered as a valid contribution to social scientific understanding. The works of liberals, Marxists, feminists, post-colonialists, and other value-defined positions may be treated as, in principle, complementary to each other. Only if their accounts fail the scientific test of empirical adequacy can they be rejected and denied a place in the framework of sociological understanding.

My aim in this book is to elaborate this view of continuity and controversy in social theory. The development of social theory must be recaptured and understood as an intellectual enterprise built around a division of labour in

which a number of complementary themes are pursued and in which genuine areas of theoretical progress can be identified. The ideas of the founding theorists are truly formative in that they provide the foundations for all later theoretical development and they embody a recognition of elements that have a continuing relevance for sociological understandings of the contemporary world.

The themes that define sociology as a discipline are cultural formation, systemic organisation, socialisation, action, conflict, and nature, and in Chapter 2 I show how these themes emerged from the 'discovery' of the social in Enlightenment discourse. Parallel intellectual undertakings in Britain, France, and Germany were built around a recognition of the social factor and an elaboration of the intellectual means through which this could be explored. A massive growth of intellectual activity, beginning in the 1830s, established 'sociology' as a discipline alongside a range of other social sciences, and formative theorists began to elaborate their central concerns. Auguste Comte and Herbert Spencer were the globally important figures in the emergence of sociology and the elaboration of its intellectual themes.

In Chapters 3 and 4 I review the range of formative theory, showing how the basic elements in social theory were elaborated in a diverse range of theorists across Europe and the United States, as well as in parts of Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Chapter 3 considers work on the cultural formation of individuals, their socialisation into particular cultures, and their systemic organisation into structures of social relations. Chapter 4 looks at formative ideas on the action and interaction of individuals, the conflict of social groups, and the conditioning of social life by natural environmental and bodily conditions. In each chapter I try to indicate the diversity of theoretical frameworks, emphasising that the formative influences in sociology cannot be reduced to Marx, Weber, and Durkheim.

The aim of these chapters is to provide a comprehensive intellectual mapping of the sociological enterprise, allowing each significant contribution to be understood in its larger context. At various points in these chapters I have included 'Focus' boxes in which I highlight particular theorists whose work can be taken as exemplary and whose study in depth will round-out the general picture presented. Those studying theory through a small selection of theorists – typically the case in university sociology today – will be able to use this book and its Focus boxes to broaden their understanding of that work.

In Chapters 5 and 6 I turn to contemporary theory, taking the Second World War as the natural divide between formative and contemporary theory. I show how knowledge and understanding of each of the themes of sociological analysis was broadened and articulated in this period, though some areas show greater advance than others. Cultural formation, socialisation, and systemic organisation

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are the topics considered in Chapter 5. I show that the disciplinary differentiation of sociology from social psychology has led to a relative marginalisation of socialisation within sociology. Significant intellectual advances are apparent in the study of both cultural formation and systemic organisation. Action, conflict, and nature are the themes considered in Chapter 6, and progressive intellectual work is less marked in each of these. Investigation of the natural environment was affected by the disciplinary differentiation of human geography from sociology, though environmental influences, even in geography, were marginalised until very recently. In the area of the body, however, major advances have been made by feminist and other theorists. Approaches to action have made some advance on earlier work, thanks to the attempt to theorise interaction rather than simply individual action. Less progress is apparent in the analysis of conflict, though contemporary work has highlighted the conditions for successful collective action. Throughout Chapters 5 and 6 I continue the use of Focus boxes so that the contributions of particular contemporary theorists can be placed in the larger context.

Sociology originated as the science of modern society, and the key debate in contemporary theory has been the question of whether contemporary societies are still 'modern' in character. The theoretical innovations of contemporary theorists have been geared towards this particular empirical question. It is this that I turn to in Chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 7 asks what it means to be 'modern', and I review the generally accepted arguments about the nature of modern society and its leading social institutions. In Chapter 8 I turn to those contemporary theorists who have suggested that modernity has transmuted into 'late' or 'radical' forms or has, perhaps, acquired a 'post-modern' character. Modern social institutions have been seen as significantly affected by, variously, the expansion of knowledge and information, the networking of collective agencies, and the globalisation of social relations. In assessing these views I demonstrate that the theorists concerned have drawn, implicitly if not explicitly, on formative theorists as well as on other contemporary theorists.

Sociology is an exciting enterprise and nothing is more exciting than the engagement in theoretical analysis and debate. I have sought to convey some of this excitement and the ideas that have emerged from sociological debates. I provide no definitive answers to the many questions raised, but I hope to have reviewed the varying answers that have been given by those who can be considered to have contributed to the development of social theory. In doing so, I have not limited my attention to those who have defined themselves as 'sociologists'. I take a broadly inclusive approach to social theory as this is the only basis on which genuine advance has taken place in the past and can continue to occur in the future.