Sociology’s Family Tree

Theories: Abstract propositions about how things are as well as how they should be. They are often described as approaches, Paradigms, or perspectives. So a social theory is an abstract model that attempts to explain and predict the social world.

Sociology’s Roots

The early social theorists were not actually sociologists, but from a variety of different backgrounds that wanted to look at society in a new way.

Auguste Comte – 1798-1857

He was the first to look at a scientific study of society – he referred to as “social physics”. He looked at how human thinking developed from theological to scientific stages. The final stage known as positivism looked to identify laws that describe the behavior of a particular reality. Positivism states that the only valid source of knowledge comes from your senses. He lived during the French Revolution and the introduction of the scientific method. He wanted to apply that concept to social affairs. He coined the term sociology.

Harriet Martineau 1802-1876

She was a well educated English woman who studied the American way of life through its own standards of democracy and saw that it was well short of the ideals that it spoke about especially when looking at women’s suffrage and slavery. She was the precursor to the naturalist sociologist. She is most known for her translation of Comte’s work into English.

Herbert Spencer 1820-1903

Responsible for bringing sociology to America and England. He took Darwin’s theory of evolution and natural selection and applied it to society. He wrote a book called “First Principles” and proposed that societies evolve through time with those less successful at adapting disappearing. He referred to this as social Darwinism.

Macrosociological Theories

The late 19th century was a time period of great change. People began to look at those changes on a large scheme and see how they affected the individual. Out of this time period came two major theories – functionalism and conflict theory.

Functionalism or structural functionalism is the dominant theory.

Founder – Emile Durkheim 1858-1917

He lived during the Franco Prussian war and was looking for a way to rebuild the French society that had been devastated by the war. He didn’t think the traditional abstract moral philosophy was going to work and looked to the more concrete science and Comte’s work.

He realized that social bonds are present in all types of societies but they were different depending on the society. Mechanical solidarity or bonds were what worked in agricultural societies. They focused on shared beliefs and traditions. The bonds were different in industrial societies and were organic solidarity where the bonds were based on tasks performed, interdependence, and individual rights. He also showed that both types of solidarity had interpersonal bonds as well. To demonstrate this he looked at suicide and related it not to individual actions but to social factors such as religion, marital status and employment. He said that you can’t just look at the psychological makeup of a person that commits suicide, you have to look at everything. What he found was that if people don’t have those bonds that people suffer from anomie or a loss of purpose. He also looked at religion as being the most powerful source of solidarity. Regardless of the religion, its followers all believe in the same things that are sacred (divine) and profane   
(everyday) so that everyone becomes part of a moral society. All the rituals that are performed are done so that people feel part of the community. The sense of energy that you get when you partake in this is known as collective effervescence. As a result of all the above you create a collective conscience (like Carl Jung) that has the morality and shared beliefs and values of the community. Durkheim was the one that brought sociology to the forefront and validated Comte’s theory by using empirical or scientific methods to study social reality.

Two main principles of functionalism:

1. society is a stable ordered system made up of interrelated parts or structures
2. each structure has a function that contributes to that stability.

Anytime there is dysfunction in the stability, change occurs.

Offshoots: Although this was the dominant perspective, it was modified and changed when it came to America and continued to spread as the result of two men: Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton.

Talcott Parsons elaborated on the theory and included some of the functions. He came up with three functions of social structures:

1. adapt to the environment
2. opportunities for success and meeting goals.
3. social cohesion

Robert Merton identified both manifest - obvious and latent - hidden functions of the different structures. So for example school has the manifest function of providing education while its latent function is to keep kids off the streets.

Advantages and Critiques:

Advantages:

1. inclusive of all social institutions
2. brings order to a disorderly world

Critiques:

1. provides little insight into social processes because it is a static rather than dynamic model.
2. focuses on macro so little explanation of independent human action (no approach to the individual except to look at society as a whole)
3. explanations of inequality are unsatisfying
4. Just because something continues to exist does not mean it should.

Conflict Theory

It focuses on social inequality and this helps some of the critiques of structural functionalism.

Founder: Karl Marx - 1818-1883

Conflict Theory is also called marxism since it is based on his teaching. his teachings are also the basis of communism (government based on collective ownership of the means of production). The basics of his theory is that conflict causes social change.

Marx was an intellectual but due to his ties to other radicals he was not allowed to pursue a career in academia. Instead he turned to journalism which further pushed him from the mainstream as he often wrote things that irritated the government. He was a middle class man, but relied heavily on his friends financially. He lived during the industrial revolution - a time period of great social change. As a result there was a lot of turmoil that he blamed on capitalism. He proposed a different plan - communism.

According to him, capitalism was creating two social classes based on wealth. The Bourgeoisie were those that owned the means of production and the proletariat were the workers. Everything of value was based on labor which the proletariat had but they suffered from alienation because they could not directly benefit from their labor. Eventually, the oppression would become unbearable and they would rise up and crush capitalism. He envisioned a classless society - socialism- in which everyone contributed. His total plan was written in a book called Das Kapital which later became the foundation of communism and socialism. Since his ideas were so out there - they were not accepted by the mainstream until the 1960s.

Principles:

1. conflict and tension are basic to social life.
2. People disagree over goals, values, resources, and power
3. Since the Bourgeoisie were in charge of everything, they reinforced the class structure so everything represented their interests.
4. Because people believed in what the bourgeoisie were selling - the status quo, people had a false consciousness - denial of the truth - and until they attained class consciousness they would never change the status quo.
5. Social change will happen when there is enough conflict and tension. There is a dialectical model where there are two extreme positions and they will eventually come to a middle ground. The existing social arrangements or thesis would generate an antithesis or opposite arrangements. The contradiction would lead to a synthesis or new social arrangement.

Offshoots: Conflict theory has continued to evolve to look at power and inequality.

1. Critical theory - most adopted modern form of Marxism. They saw the importance of mass communication and popular culture as ideological tools in capitalist societies. These were ways they were spread. They criticized the growing consumerism and that it would lead to a decline in personal freedom.

Others have branched off from critical theory to look at other forms of inequality including racism, gender, and sexuality.

1. WEB DuBois focused on the inequalities of race and ethnicity. He looked at the causes and consequences of prejudice and discrimination.
2. Feminist Theory - came with the women’s rights movement. looks at gender inequalities in social institutions
3. Queer Theory - came out of the gay and lesbian rights movement of the 70s and 80s and has a resurgence today. It says categories of sexuality - homo, hetero, etc are social constructs. It says none are deviant and we create those definitions so we can change them.

Advantages:

1. The idea of praxis - practical action. you need to act on what you believe. He didn’t want to just describe it but to change it as well.
2. good for both macro and micro level social issues.
3. Very different than structural functionalism,. social arrangements exist because the ones in power want it, not because it serves a purpose for the whole.

Critiques: can ignore parts of society are are orderly, stable ,and enduring.

Weberian Theory

Founder: Max Weber 1864-1920

Weber developed his theory after being disillusioned with the strict academic regime. (fight and death of father, lots of freudian related issues) He changed his view of social forces such as work ethic - that he by the way had a great one - He wanted to study the shift from traditional society to a modern society. He was fascinated with the idea of rationalization - or the application of economic logic to all spheres of human activity. In his book, he believed that industrial societies are characterized by goal oriented, rule governed bureaucracies. These inturn drove individual behavior and became more important than traditions, values, and emotions as motivators. he said people were trapped in an iron cage of bureaucratic rules. and that contemporary life was filled with disenchantment which was the result of the dehumanizing features of the bureaucracies.

His theory is a bridge between social theory (macro) and micro theories. His focus was how individual motivation led to certain social actions and how those actions helped shape society as a whole. He used the term verstehen - empathetic understanding to describe how a social scientist should study human action.

Microsociological Theory

As the new century came about, the shift of intellectuals moved from Europe to America.

Symbolic Interactionism

This is America’s contribution. It helps explain the individual personalities and the way in which we are all linked together. It looks specifically at how social order and social change are constructed.

Founder: George Herbert Mead (1863-1931) - he’s the main contributor.

The University of Chicago in the 1920s was a great place for intellectuals. Sociology -= still a European dominated subject was growing in importance and grew to include some of the best American sociologists. They became known as the Chicago School. They looked at things differently and conducted interviews and collected observational data. This was different to the comparative and historical work that had been done by the other approaches. The focus was on the everyday interactions as the building blocks of larger social phenomena - like they looked at race relations and racial inequality. It was influenced by pragmatism (concept developed by William James and John Dewey that assumes organisms make practical adaptations to their environments - through the use of cognition, interpretation, and interaction). To James it meant seeking the truth by evaluating its usefulness. So if it works, it’s true. Mead pulled these ideas together into a theory that addressed questions about the relationship between thought and action - the individual and society.

According to Mead, both human development and the meanings we assign to everyday objects and events are fundamentally social processes - they require interaction. Crucial to this development is language. To him, there is no mind without language and language itself is a product of social interactions. The most important behaviors are linguistic gestures such as words and facial expressions. These gestures are what allow us to take part in conversations. He also believed that the self and society developed together. So the personality was shaped by the environment and vice versa. Mead’s work was continued by Herbert Blumer who encouraged the sociologists to get “down and dirty” with the dynamics of social life. He is the one that gave a name to Mead’s work - symbolic interactionism.

Original Principles:

Society is produced and reproduced through interactions by means of language and interpretations of language.

1. we act toward things on the basis of their meanings
2. meanings are not inherent, they are negotiated through interaction with others.
3. meaning can change or be modified through interactions

social facts exist only because we create and recreate them through our interactions.

Offshoots: Some focus on social acts rather than social facts.

Erving Goffman: - the self is on loan to us from society. It is created through interactions with others and is ever changing. He used the idea of dramaturgy - a metaphor of the theater to understand how we present themselves to others.

Harold Garfinkel - ethnomethodology - study of folk methods - analysis of everyday interaction. He says we must acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to act practically in our everyday lives. Most of this knowledge is latent - in the background and we assume others have the same knowledge we do. This allows us to make meaning out of ambiguous or troublesome events. But it requires work to maintain and sustain them even as we are unaware that we are doing so.

Conversation Analysis is based on the idea that we are constantly analyzing and giving meaning to our social world. They look at conversations to see the meanings that are given.

Advantages: they look at both the individual and the social at the same level. it allows you to link the past and the future together. Created a new foundation for research methods.

Critiques: - some thought it was expanding too fast that it was going to turn into something altogether different. Some saw it as a reaction to the macrosociology theories.. They say the scope is limited because it only looks at face to face interactions.

New Theoretical Approaches:

PostModern Theory

Founders and Key contributors” Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jean Baudrillard.

They address the questions that reality is diverse, pluralistic and constantly in flux. To understand them, you have to understand modernism which values scientific knowledge, a linear view of history, and a belief in the universality of human nature. Post modernists on the other hand think they are no absolutes that everything is always changing.

Some like it because it moves away from the stifling effects of rationality and tradition, while others say it is a bad influence that imprisons us in a world of relativity and chaos. They say it has moved too far away scientific method. For others this is why it is attractive. It allows questioning of the scientific method and points out some of its flaws.

Midrange Theory - this integrates empiricism and grand theory. It is more of a style of theorizing than a theory. It was created by Robert Merton who was concerned with the macro point of view that you were looking at the grand scheme too much and never the middle of the road. So it takes empirical data into smaller scale theories that allows to build them.