

INTRODUCTION

IN THIS BOOK, we intend to introduce the reader to some authors who have made particularly significant, distinctive, and controversial contributions to the development of modern social theory. The latter is a body of scientifically oriented (and thus, as far as possible, empirically grounded) observations and interpretations regarding both social experience in general and the particular contents and forms it took with the emergence of modern culture and society. The authors in question were active between the middle of the 19th century and the second half of the following one. We have chosen to discuss only a relatively small number of these theorists, treating each in his own chapter, without systematically relating each to the others, and without explicitly comparing and contrasting positions with those taken by others.

This is of course a highly conventional arrangement of our materials. But we would like to characterize our treatment as *interpretive*, for throughout we:

Are highly selective

Consider only some of the themes each author has dealt with

Emphasize only what we consider the salient aspects of his thinking

Link, as far as possible, their work to a central vision that, we suggest, is exclusive to each author

In particular, each chapter seeks to identify in the first instance what we have called a given author's "philosophical anthropology," that is, his image of the human being, his understanding of the distinctive potentialities and vulnerabilities that orient, sustain, and constrain human individuals in constructing and managing their relations with one another. We start by considering these significant and original concerns as something of a common thread traceable throughout the majority of each author's writings, diverse as they may be.

This interpretive focus entails not seeking to summarize and evaluate each author's writings as a whole, reviewing them systematically and tracking their

sources, or pointing to the large body of comments and criticisms of those writings by other authors. Rather, we aim to characterize *our* authors' views on issues still open in social theory discourse, for such views, we feel, continue to inspire, more or less explicitly and self-consciously, the positions taken on those issues in much contemporary sociological writing.

Why seek to introduce readers, as we suggest, to modern social theory by focusing on single authors from the remote or proximate past, rather than, say, on particular concepts, distinctive methodological approaches, or specific empirical inquiries? According to some critics, the insistence with which sociological debates refer back to the so-called classics, or to other significant writers whose major writings have appeared *at least* several decades ago, is a marker, or even a cause, of the scientific immaturity of the discipline. It suggests—allegedly—intellectual insecurity, unwillingness, or inability to advance by means of self-standing research undertakings, building on and thereby surpassing past contributions, or referring to them at most occasionally and perfunctorily. In contrast, they argue, mature sciences, beginning with the natural sciences, forget their founders, or at any rate do not consider revisiting their writings (much less holding a reverential attitude toward them) a necessary and significant component of their own intellectual mission. They work, one says, “cumulatively”; that is, each research undertaking builds only on the valid findings of immediately preceding ones, assuming that these have in turn assimilated and codified the valid findings of previous ones, and subjecting its own to the same process of selective acceptance or refusal by successive researchers. Even some social disciplines approach this model. Contemporary economists, for instance, do not consider themselves duty bound to read Adam Smith closely (if at all).

Now, undoubtedly and fortunately, also within sociology many contemporary research undertakings stand in such a “cumulative” relationship to preceding work. If, for instance, one compares research on social mobility from the 1950s with that from the last decade, one cannot help but see an irreversible progress that consigns many former inquiries to the forgettable past. The same can be said about the sociological literature addressing other research themes, from electoral behavior to family structures, from migration to deviance and criminality.

In spite of this, we find it wholly appropriate for contemporary sociological discourse to maintain a close relationship to a small number of authors more or less remote in time; engage in a self-conscious dialogue with their thinking;

and consider some of their writings a fundamental component in the intellectual formation of new generations of students, scholars, and researchers. We do so for two main reasons.

First, sociological discourse has a *noncumulative* dimension, which commits it to reflect at least occasionally on its own premises, its own intellectual and moral justifications. On this account, it refers back to previous confrontations with these themes, which over time have established themselves as most significant. Second, what we refer to as revisiting authors having, let us say, *canonical* status—assuming these authors are appropriately selected—affords contemporary readers, and particularly those just beginning to orient themselves within the sociological discipline, a unique opportunity to familiarize themselves with the legacies of extraordinary minds important or even foundational to the discipline. Readers can thus engage with writings that provide inspiring exemplars and models and that may shape and orient their own sociological imagination.

Such writings, furthermore, point out the futility of any kind of sociological sectarianism, the insistence of some contemporary sociologists on the necessity of placing rigid boundaries around what constitutes properly and exclusively sociological discourse. Contrarily, among the authors whom we treat, even those expressly committed to founding and promoting the discipline of sociology, giving it a distinctive substantial content and methodological profile, never hesitated to transgress its boundaries—by engaging in historical, philosophical, psychological, and economic discourse—when necessary to address problems more satisfactorily.

On the other hand, as already suggested, we are not seeking here to produce a concise “life and works” statement about our authors, undertake a close and sophisticated exegesis of individual writings, or identify once and for all “what is alive and what is dead” in their intellectual legacies. In fact, we believe that in contemporary sociological literature there is if anything an excess of such exegetical exercises and a tendency to consider all of an author’s writing relevant. Moreover, we feel, in the writings of our authors the student often finds untenable or futile arguments, which may lead her into an intellectual blind alley. Thus we emphasize discussing those writings and those theoretical suggestions, insights, and problems we view as still *valuable* (which does not always mean *valid*). On this account they still deserve, so to speak, to be put in the spotlight to stimulate and evoke further reflection.

To the extent that we succeed in this task, we hope to lead readers to the further, potentially more fulfilling task of directly engaging the writings of these authors. (Acceptable translations of those not originally written in English are widely available, sometimes also online.)

Why did we choose *these* nine authors rather than others, or a greater number? The first four—Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel—have long been acknowledged as rightful members of the canon of modern social theory. We associate ourselves with this preference, and also (somewhat regretfully) with the current exclusion from the same canon of Vilfredo Pareto, an Italian author who for a time was reputed to deserve inclusion. We take equally for granted that, among contemporary authors, Talcott Parsons undoubtedly deserves to be considered. We think George Herbert Mead qualifies for a similar position; his ideas, after a period of neglect, have lately attracted much attention on the part of both sociologists and other social scientists. We would expect more objections to our choice of the remaining three authors—Garfinkel, Goffman, and Luhmann—and (perhaps even more) to our exclusion of such contemporaries of theirs as Foucault, Habermas, and Bourdieu. Garfinkel and Goffman, however, seem to us to have had (and to be having) a more significant impact on contemporary sociological work. They also enjoy a surplus of visibility and authoritativeness from having written and published while working in one or more great American universities. Goffman's writings, furthermore, have an advantage accruing from their remarkable literary qualities (a distinction alas not always shared by the other authors). A different reason led us to include Luhmann, with a chapter written specifically for this English edition: we consider him one of the major figures of European social thought, one who has received so far, in the English-speaking world, less critical attention than is deserved.

As we have already suggested, our greatest hope for this book is that it will induce readers to venture personally into the writings of one or more of the authors. To this end, we seek to offer enough information to enable readers to orient themselves in establishing direct contact with those primary sources. As a result, each chapter opens with a paragraph offering a brief biographical sketch of the author in question, including a brief list of what we consider his most significant works. The selection is unavoidably arbitrary and might easily be complemented by other titles, which for some reason we have not found equally informative and substantial. In drafting our chapters, however, we have made no reference to

the life course of the authors, nor tried to locate them within the broader story of modern social theory, and have not referred to the large body of secondary literature dealing with them. This decision does not, of course, imply we do not acknowledge the validity of other scholarly approaches to our authors, or more broadly to sociological theory. To signal this, we close our book with a section that recommends a few valuable works in English to readers wishing to learn more about the “great minds” we discuss.

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