



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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[Suggest a correction](#)

Contents

Part I. [Early American Sociology](#)

1. Charles A. Ellwood on Revolution (1905)

9

PART IV

EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

I. Charles A. Ellwood on Revolution (1905)

“A society whose habits become inflexible for any reason is liable to disaster.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from an article published as “A Psychological Theory of Revolutions” in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1905 (volume 11, number 1, pages 49-59). The selection here is quite faithful to the original text, with minimal abbreviation.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

In this article, Ellwood uses a general sociological approach to investigate a particular social phenomenon, the largescale socio-political revolution. By doing so, he advances American sociology by demonstrating its applicability to phenomena that had previously been evaluated more philosophically. This is also an excellent example of what American sociology would develop to be in the twentieth century: specialized analyses within the field, rather than overall systemic theory.

Revolutions

Among the phenomena of social evolution there are none more striking to the student of history and sociology than those commonly called revolutions. I do not use the word in a loose sense to designate any sudden political or social change from *coups d'étator* “palace revolutions” to reversions in fashions and industrial changes due to great inventions; but I refer to those convulsive movements in the history of societies in which the form of government, or, it may be, the type of the industrial and social order, is suddenly transformed. Such movements always imply a shifting of the center of social control from one class to another, and inwardly are often marked by a change in the psychical basis of social control; that is, a change in the leading ideas, beliefs, and sentiments upon which the social order rests. Outwardly such movements are characterized by bloody struggles between the privileged and the unprivileged classes, which not infrequently issue in social confusion and anarchy. Revolutions in this sense are best typified in modern history, perhaps, by the Puritan Revolution in England and by the French Revolution. Less typical, but still in some sense revolutions, were our War for Independence and our Civil War.

The objective explanations of revolutions which have usually been offered by historians and economists (that is, explanations in terms of economic, governmental, and other factors largely external) have been far from satisfactory, inasmuch as they have lacked that universal element which is the essential of all true science.

These explanations have, to be sure, pointed out true causes operating in particular revolutions, but they have failed to reveal the universal mechanism through which all revolutions must take place. In the mind of the sociologist, therefore, there has arisen the further question: Is there any explanation of revolutions in general? What is their significance in the social life-process? Have they any universal form or method of development, and is that method capable of scientific formulation?

To have even asked these questions a score of years ago would probably have called forth a storm of ridicule. But such has been the progress of science that today many, if not most, social investigators would admit the possibility of finding universal forms in social occurrences, and so in revolutions. If a digression may be permitted, I would say that this change of attitude on the part of scientific students of society is due largely to the progress of the science of psychology. The new functional psychology has proposed to interpret all mental life in terms of habit and adaptation; and the new psychological sociology, which is building itself up on the basis of the new psychology, proposes to do the same thing for the social life. Thus the possibility of finding universal forms for social occurrences on the subjective side, if not on the side of objective, environmental factors, is today more widely accepted than ever before.

The reasons for the failure of the objective method of explaining social events are, indeed, now quite obvious. It is now seen that nearly all social occurrences are in the nature of responses to external stimuli. But these responses are not related, psychology tells us, to their stimuli as effects are to causes, as sociologists have so often assumed. The same response or similar responses may be called forth by very different stimuli, since the stimulus is only the opportunity for the discharge of energy. Consequently, any explanation of social occurrences in terms of external causes or stimuli is in a sense foredoomed to failure, since such an explanation will fall short of that universality which science demands. Hence the demands for a subjective or psychological explanation of social phenomena, a demand which is being met today by the new psychological sociology.

It is in accordance with this demand that I venture to offer a psychological theory of revolutions. It is not claimed that this theory of revolutions is anything absolutely new; foreshadowing of it are to be found in many historical and sociological writers.

The essence of the theory is this: that revolutions are disturbances in the social order due to the sudden breakdown of social habits under conditions which make difficult the reconstruction of those habits, that is, the formation of a new social order. In other words, revolutions arise through certain interferences or disturbances in the normal process of the readjustment of social habits.

The merit which is claimed for this theory is that it is in harmony with the new psychology and attempts to explain revolutions in terms of habit and adaptation. Habit and adaptation have their social consequences, not less than their individual mental consequences. The institutions and customs of society are but social expressions of habit, while the normal changes in the social order may be looked upon as social adaptations. Habit and adaptation are, therefore, fundamental categories for the interpretation of the social life-process not less than of the individual life-process; and the theory of revolutions here presented attempts to bring their phenomena within these categories.

Normally social habits are continually changing; old habits are gradually replaced by new ones as the life-conditions change. Normally the breakdown of a social habit is so gradual that by the time the old habit disappears a new habit has been constructed to take its place. Thus the process of social change, of

continuous readjustment in society, goes on under normal conditions without shock or disturbance; new habits, or institutions, adapted to the new life-conditions replace the old habits and institutions which are no longer adapted. This transition from one habit to another is effected under ordinary conditions in society by such peaceful means as public criticism, discussion, the formation of a public opinion, and the selection of individuals to carry out the line of action socially determined upon. But where these normal means of effecting readjustments in the social life are lacking, social habits and institutions become relatively fixed and immobile, and a conservative organization of society results.

Now, societies, like individuals, are in danger when their habits for any reason become inflexible. In the world of life, with its constant change and ceaseless struggle, only those organisms can survive which maintain a high degree of flexibility or adaptability. It is even so in the world of societies. As Professor Ward says: "When a society makes for itself a procrustean bed, it is simply preparing the way for its own destruction by the on-moving agencies of social dynamics."

It is evident, then, that *a society whose habits become inflexible for any reason is liable to disaster*. That disaster may come in two forms: it may come in the form of conquest or subjugation by a foreign foe; or it may come in the form of internal disruption or revolution, when the conditions of life have sufficiently changed to make old habits and institutions no longer workable. It is with this latter case that we are concerned. The conditions under which social habits become inflexible, hard and fast, are many, and I shall attempt no specific enumeration of them. In a general way they have already been indicated by saying that the mechanism by which the transition from one social habit to another is effected – namely, public criticism, free discussion, public opinion- has been destroyed. This has occurred most frequently no doubt, under despotic forms of government; and hence the connection in popular thought between tyranny and revolution. Not only absolute monarchies, but aristocracies and oligarchies also, have frequently created types of social organization which were relatively inflexible. Such governments, however, are only one of many conditions favorable to social immobility. Authoritative religions which have glorified a past and put under ban all progress have also had much to do with creating social inflexibility. Again, the mental character of a people has much to do with the adaptability and progressiveness of the social groups which it forms, and some writers would make this the chief factor. Finally, it is well-known that in societies without any of the impediments of despotic government, public sentiment, prejudice, fanaticism, and class interest can and do suppress free thought and free speech and produce a relatively inflexible type of society. Whatever the cause of their immobility, societies with inflexible habits and institutions are bound to have trouble. The conditions of social life rapidly change, and opposing forces accumulate until, sooner or later, the old habit is overwhelmed.

Under these conditions the breakdown of the old habit is sharp and sudden; and the society, being unused to the process of readjustment, and largely lacking the machinery therefore, is unable for a greater or less length of time to reconstruct its habits. There ensues, in consequence, a period of confusion and uncertainty in which competing interests in the society strive for the mastery. If the breakdown under these conditions be that of a habit which affects the whole social life-process, and especially the system of social control, we have a revolution. It is consequent upon such a breakdown of social habit, then, that the phenomena of revolutions arise. But before considering some of these phenomena in detail, let us note somewhat more concretely how the old habits and institutions are overthrown. Of course, the opposing forces must embody themselves in a party of opposition or revolt. This party is composed, on the whole, of those individuals whom the changed conditions of social life most affect, those on whom the old social habits set least easily. The

psychology of the revolt of large numbers of men to an established social order is, at bottom, a simple matter. It is simply a case of the breakdown of a social habit at its weakest point, that is, among those individuals with whom the habit is least workable, or, in other words, whose interest lies in another direction. From these the attitude of revolt spreads by imitation, first among those to whom the old social habits are ill-adapted, and finally among all who are susceptible to the influence of suggestion. Thus the party of opposition grows until it comes to embody all of the influences and interests which make the old habits and institutions ill-adapted or even unworkable.

If these forces continue to grow, it is evident that there is possible to the ruling classes only two alternatives: either they must make concessions, that is, attempt themselves the readjustment of institutions; or they must face actual conflict with the party of opposition. As a matter of fact, historically the former alternative has much more often been chosen, thus open conflict avoided, and so-called "peaceful revolutions" effected. If, however, no concessions are made by the ruling classes, or only such as are insufficient to bring about the readjustments demanded by the life-conditions; if, in other words, the relative inflexibility of the social order is maintained, then the antagonism between the old social habits and the new life-conditions can be resolved only by open conflict between the ruling classes and the party of revolt. And when this conflict results in the success of the party of revolt, we call it a "revolution." Thus, the old social order is overthrown, violently, suddenly, and sometimes almost completely.

Now in the transition from one habit to another in the individual there is frequently to be observed a period of confusion and uncertainty; and this confusion is intensified if the breakdown of the old habit has been sudden or violent. We should expect, therefore, an analogous confusion in society upon the breakdown of social habits; and this is exactly what we find. The so-called anarchy of revolutionary periods is not due simply to the absence of efficient governmental machinery, but to the general breakdown of the social order. The anarchy is, of course, proportionate to the violence and completeness with which the old habits and institutions are overthrown.

Again, in such periods of confusion in the individual consequent upon the entire breakdown of a habit, we observe a tendency to atavism or reversion in his activities; that is, the simpler and more animal activities tend to come to expression. This tendency not only manifests itself in revolutions but is of course greatly intensified by the struggle between the classes; for fighting, as one of the simplest and most primitive activities of people greatly stimulates all the lower centers of action. Hence the reversionary character of many revolutionary periods. They appear to us, and truly are, epochs in which the brute and the savage in us reassert themselves and dominate many phases of the social life. The methods of acting, of attaining ends, in revolutions are, indeed, often characteristic of much lower stages of culture. These methods, as a rule, are unreflective, extremely direct and crude.

Thus resort to brute force is constant, and when attempts are made at psychological control, it is usually through appeal to the lower emotions, especially fear. Hence the terrorism which is sometimes a feature of revolutions, and which conspicuously marked the French Revolution. Here another striking phenomenon of revolutionary epochs must be noted; and that is the part played at such times by mobs and other crowds. It is evident that in the confusion and excitement of revolutionary times the most favorable conditions exist for the formation of crowds and the doing of their work. There is an absence, on the one hand, of those

controlling habits, ideas, and sentiments which secure order in a population; and, on the other hand, there is the reversion to the unreflective type of mental activities. Under such conditions crowds are easily formed, and a suggestion suffices to, incite them to the most extreme deeds.

Thus much of the bloodiest work of revolutions is done by crowds. But it is a mistake to think that true revolutions can be initiated by mobs, or carried through by a series of them. Revolutions simply afford opportunities for mobs to manifest themselves to a much greater degree than they can in normal social life.

The duration of the period of confusion, anarchy, and mob rule in a revolution is dependent upon a number of factors. If the party of revolt is united upon a program, and if the population generally has not lost its power of readjustment, the period of confusion may be so short as to, be practically negligible.

Under such circumstances the reconstruction of new social habits and institutions goes on rapidly under the guidance of the revolutionary party. As an illustration of this particular type of revolution with a happy outcome we may take our War of Independence. In this case the relative unity of the revolutionary party, the incompleteness of the destruction of the old social order, the vigorous power of readjustment in a relatively free population, all favored the speedy reconstruction of social institutions.

Unfortunately, this speedy reconstruction of social habits is not the outcome of all revolutions. Too often the revolutionary party is unified in nothing except its opposition to the old regime. It can find no principal or interest upon which a new social order can be reconstructed. Moreover, through a long period of social immobility the population seems often to have lost in great degree its power of re-adaptation. Indeed, in rare cases, peoples seem to have lost all power of making stable readjustments for themselves.

Under any or all of these conditions it is evident that the period of confusion, anarchy, and mob-rule in a revolution must continue for a relatively long time. During this time frequent attempts may be made at the reconstruction of the social order without success. These attempts are continued until some adequate stimulus is found, either in an ideal principle or in the personality of some hero, to reconstruct the social habits of the population. Or, if no basis for the reconstruction of the social order can be found, revolution may become chronic; and the period of relative anarchy and mob-rule may last for years, only to be ended perhaps by the subjugation and government of the population by an external power.

A more usual outcome, however, to the chronic revolutionary condition is the "dictatorship." How this can arise from the conditions in revolutionary times is not difficult to understand. The labors of ethnologists have shown us that democracy in some shape is the natural and primitive form of government among all races of mankind; that despotism has arisen everywhere through social stresses and strains, usually those accompanying prolonged war, when a strong centralized system of social control becomes necessary, if the group is to survive.

Now, in that internal war which we call a revolution, if it is prolonged, it is evident that we have all the conditions favorable to the rise of despotism. When the party of revolt are unable to agree among themselves, and can offer to the population no adequate stimulus for the reconstruction of the social order, nothing is more natural than that that stimulus should be found in the personality of some hero; for social organization is primitively based upon sentiments of personal attachment and loyalty far more than upon abstract principles of social justice and expediency. The personality of a military hero affords, then, the most natural stimulus around which a new social order can, so to speak, crystallize itself, when other

means of reconstructing social institutions have failed, and when continued social danger demands a strong centralized social control. The dictatorship, in other words, does not arise because some superior man hypnotizes his social group by his brilliant exploits, but because such a man is "selected" by his society to reconstruct the social order. Caesar, Cromwell, and Napoleon, these typical dictators of revolutionary eras, would probably have had their places filled by other, though perhaps inferior, men, had they themselves never existed.

Here may be briefly explained, finally, the reaction which frequently follows revolutions. No revolution is, of course, complete; it is never more than a partial destruction of old habits and institutions. Now new habits, psychology tells us, have to be erected on the basis of old habits. What remains of the old social habits after a revolution must serve, therefore, as the foundation for the new institutions, since no other foundation is possible. After repeated attempts at reconstruction of the social order which have failed, it is the easiest thing to copy the old institutions, and this is often the only successful means of restoring social stability. Hence the reversion to pre-revolutionary conditions. But, in the nature of things, such a reaction is usually only temporary. The population has learned that the social order can be changed, and at some later time is quite sure to attempt it again.

If the theory of revolutions here outlined is in any degree correct, it is evident that they are regular phenomena conforming to the laws of the mental life. It is possible, therefore, to predict their occurrence in the sense that the conditions favorable to their development can be stated. This has already been done in the discussion of our theory, but it may be worth our while to consider these conditions more critically, in order to see how far social prevision is possible in this matter and in social science in general.

It is evident that, according to our theory, revolution is impossible in a perfectly flexible and adaptable type of social organization. On the other hand, revolution is inevitable, barring foreign conquest, in those types of social and political organization which do not change with changing life-conditions. Thus, from a purely theoretical point of view everything seems clear.

But when we apply these principles to concrete societies, we experience difficulties. It is, easy to predict, in the case of extremely inflexible societies like China and Russia, that revolution, is, sooner or later, inevitable, unless conditions greatly change. Even in this easiest instance, however, our foresight is qualified by a great "if." But we cannot say with even as much assurance that our democratic societies are free from the danger of revolution. They may have the forms of freedom without the substance. Our own American society, for example, may be relatively inflexible in certain matters which are of vital importance to the life of our group. A tyrannical public sentiment or class interest may induce even in a democracy such an inflexibility or stagnation in institutions that only a revolution can sweep away the obstructing social structure. This is what actually occurred in the case of slavery in our country, which institution required a war of essentially revolutionary character for its overthrow. This can happen again in the future; for example, in the relations of the capitalistic and wage-earning classes.

Whenever, in fact, an institution or a condition of society is set above public criticism, and freedom of discussion and thought is suppressed concerning it, we have a condition of social inflexibility and a loss of the power of adaptation which may breed revolution. Thus the most that can be said in the way of predicting revolutions must be in very general terms. All that we can say is that some societies are more liable to revolutions than others, while no society can safely be judged to be entirely free from the danger

of revolution. In other words, no one can say where revolutions will occur, and much less when. But this negative conclusion regarding the predictability of revolutions is not valueless. If the social sciences cannot foretell social events, they nevertheless can so define the conditions under which they occur that social development can be controlled.

Thus, it is of value to society to know the general conditions under which revolutions occur; for such knowledge points out the way by which revolutions can be avoided. Surely it cannot be valueless for a society to know that by encouraging intelligent public criticism, free discussion, and free thought about social conditions and institutions, by keeping itself adaptable, flexible, alert for betterment, it is pursuing the surest way to avoid future disaster. *Social science, if it cannot foretell the future, can nevertheless indicate the way of social health and security.*

The important practical truth, then, brought out by this study of revolutions, is that which has been so well expressed by Professor Ward when he says of societies: Only the labile is truly stable, just as in the domain of living things only the plastic is enduring. For lability is not an exact synonym of instability but embodies besides the idea of flexibility and susceptibility to change without destruction or loss. It is that quality in institutions which enables them to change and still persist, which converts their equilibrium into a moving equilibrium, and which makes possible their adaptation to both internal and external modification, to changes in both individual character and the environment.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. What is the phenomenon that Ellwood is attempting to explain? How does he define and operationalize the concept of revolution? How does this compare with Marx's theory of revolution?
2. What is sociological about Ellwood's theory of revolutions? Why does he refer to it as psychological? How does it differ from historical analyses? What makes it a sociological theory?
3. Compare Ellwood's description of the rise of dictatorship to Weber's theory of charismatic authority.
4. Ellwood claims that his theory can help us predict the outbreak of revolutions. Note the date of the article and his predictions as to future revolutions. Was he correct? Use his factors to measure the health of your own society today. What is the likelihood of imminent revolution?
5. What value does sociology hold, according to Ellwood?