



## Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology



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PART IV

# EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY





# I. Franklin H. Giddings on Theory and Public Policy (1911)

“To censure is easy, and in the power of every man, but the true counsellor should point out conduct which the present exigence demands” – Demosthenes<sup>1</sup>

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from Giddings' Presidential Address to the American Sociological Society in 1910, the full title of which is “The Relation of Social Theory to Public Policy.” The speech has been shortened in part.

## Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

As one of the founders of American sociology, Giddings' reformist approach to social problems historically important. In this speech, Giddings tackles the increasing insecurity and bellicosity of international relations. In discussing the advance of sociology, Giddings makes mention of two of the “founders” of sociology – Comte and Spencer.<sup>2</sup> He also brings into the discussion a psychological dimension – of human imitation, of collective passion, and the rage of the crowd. This has some similarities to Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence, but in many regards is quite different. Think this through as you read the selection.

## Theory and Public Policy

It is an interesting circumstance that the makers of social theory in all generations have aimed to be true counselors in the sense contemplated by the Athenian orator. Like other men, they have reacted to the greater exigencies of their day. With fellow-citizens they have played their part in the collective struggle for existence and advantage. By one sort of thinking or another, their theories have been derived, at least in part, from observations or reflections upon large issues of public policy, and upon public policy they have left an impression by no means insignificant.

1. This quote from the Athenian orator graced the original article.
2. The speech actually includes a third, Bagehot, all references to which have been removed for sake of parsimony.

If their counsel has been not always wise, not always salutary, imperfect knowledge, more than any defect of patriotism, has been at fault. Until social theory became sociology, it was highly *a priori* and speculative. A conclusion much desired for fortifying a policy predetermined more often than not was the actual base of intellectual operations. Knowing what he ought to prove for the glory and safety of the state, the pragmatic political philosopher discovered adequate premises there, for as unerringly as any soothsayer to Cyrus or Alexander found the right flock of birds to deliver a prognosis of promise for expeditions then afoot.

It would be rash to assume that speculative methods have forever faded with the nobler intellects that used them “into the infinite azure of the past.” In an age which is witnessing, in supposedly educated circles, a revival of every cult of magic and demonism known among men from Gadara to Salem, we cannot feel sure that any absurdity or obsession may not again mask under the austere name of “science.” But for the time being, social theory of the speculative sort is discredited. The very name “sociology” was invented and is used to lay stress upon inductive method. To find the facts first, to sort and array them with a fine discrimination, to observe differences, resemblances, and dimensions closely, to generalize with caution, and only then to ask what suggestions, if any, the approximations to truth so obtained offer us for guidance in private and in public conduct, is now the only reputable procedure among students of social, as of physical, phenomena.

Of the founders of sociology it may be said that in a preeminent degree their interest in practical affairs was deep and continuous and directed upon the weightier matters of the law. Comte wrote *The Positive Philosophy* in part that he might fashion *The Positive Polity*. Spencer never lost sight of his initial purpose to formulate the principles of justice.

We cannot doubt that these men, like their forerunners, were tempted to lay philosophical foundations in the good old manner, for preconceived political systems. That they never dallied with the temptation need not be claimed. But to whatever extent they yielded to it, they impaired the value of their total achievement. Their abiding fame rests upon so much of their accumulation and classification of facts as was unprejudiced and so much of their generalization as was inductive in quality.

To recall these origins of inductive social theory is to realize that the work remembered was not only ground-clearing and ground-breaking; it was also superlatively constructive. Spencer’s sociological theories were formulated as a part of his evolutionist conception of the world. That conception has become an integral part of the mental equipment of every educated man. Those writers who would convince us that Spencer is forgotten are of all philosophers most miserable. They must either avoid the post-Spencerian problems or think about them in terms of Spencerian ideas.

It is a fair presumption that work of such enduring influence upon theory has not yet spent its practical power in suggestion. It is reasonable to think that, were we now to re-examine it, we might find it still an unexhausted fund of wisdom, as of correlated knowledge. It may afford us guidance today, not less than it did yesterday, for a rational criticism of public policy. To that possibility, it may be well to give attention. The problems of public policy do not become simpler with advancing civilization. To speak for the moment of our own nation, the questions that vex us are of bewildering variety and complexity: questions of territorial expansion and of rule over alien peoples; questions arising out of race conflict within our older continental domain; questions of the restriction of immigration, of the centralization or the distribution of administrative authority, of the concentration or the diffusion of economic power. Well may the skeptic ask if any science of

human relations, however wide its generalizations, can offer even presumptive answers to questions so far-reaching and so diverse. Yet every citizen, whether he be instructed or ignorant, is expected to help answer them.

Before we admit that the objection is fatal, let us remember that an overshadowing question has still to be named, and that when one question overshadows all others the relative values of the others are determined. That question is the world-old query—older than science, older than any record of history—the question, “Is it War or Peace?”

After ten thousand years of so-called progress, is reason still so ineffective against instinct that only minor issues can be removed from fields of battle to arenas of intellectual conflict? Must sovereignty—the ultimate social control—forever prove and declare itself in government by slaughter, or may international relations also be brought under government by discussion? By this “previous question” of world-politics every question of domestic politics is qualified. With war a possibility, the restriction of immigration is one problem; with war made impossible it would become an entirely different problem. A further democratizing of the social order, which might be safe if world-peace were assured, may be fraught with peril if the greater nations are again to challenge one another’s right to live. It is not an accident that international socialism is unalterably opposed to militarism under every guise and pretense.

These considerations might be dismissed as academic if it were certain that war must indefinitely continue. Happily, that is not the fact. The antagonism of nearly ten millions of socialistic voters is formidable. The best professional and business intellects of the world are ranging themselves on the side of peace. Funds with which to wage aggressive attack upon eradicable causes of war have been provided. A larger number of men, also sincere and able, reject every defense of war as invalid, but are incredulous when ways and means of disarmament are proposed.

It is precisely upon these two interpellations, namely, the desirability of world-peace and its possibility, that the verdict of sociology may rightly be demanded and should carry weight.

As all students of Spencer know, his most important sociological generalizations pertain to the characteristic differences between what he calls the militant and the industrial types of society. His theory of social causation is stated mainly in terms of war-habit and peace-habit. Mr. Spencer looked upon war as the most monstrous of social ills, as the most formidable obstacle to the complete evolution of man. His faith was in the improvability of man, the final and superlative product of cosmic evolution. He saw that improvement involves adaptation to conditions on which life depends, and ever nicer adjustments of differing interests. He believed that improvement consists in an expanding sympathy of man for man, a continuing differentiation of powers, a better and always better co-ordination of life-activities and there with an ever-deepening joy of living. It has proceeded through a social process. In this process war has played a great and recurring part. In breaking down the barriers that separated primitive men, in bringing savage camps together into tribes, in hammering tribes together intonations, war was inevitable and it was useful. Nevertheless, war achieves results through frightful cost and waste. It is incompatible with those more delicate processes of evolution which we associate, or should associate, with high civilization. This is a point of such fundamental importance, and the Spencerian demonstration of it is so complete and so irrefutable, that we may well linger for a moment to note wherein the demonstration consists.

## Evolution is simple or compound.

Simple evolution is swift, direct and business-like. Compound evolution is slow, tortuous, uncertain, halting, and unbusiness-like to the last degree.

All this is but a way of saying that growth, and the art which simulates growth, are not manufacture. Nature knows nothing of standardization. Within some given range of variation she creates types, that is to say, resemblances, but no two individuals are precisely alike. But growth, with its possibilities of correlated difference, of diversity in unity, requires freedom and takes time. It can be hastened, but only with some sacrifice of results. Some strength of fiber, some delicacy of adaptation, is missed. Hastened evolution is crude evolution. Massiveness of parts and brutality of power may be attained, but not completeness of life.

Now of all ways of hastening social evolution, war is the most obvious, the most effective, the most absolutely businesslike. A well-organized and well-drilled army is the best example of standardization that we know. Conquest and a rigorous military rule over conquered foes are the quickest way to integrate and standardize vast populations. The product is a militaristic empire. It is massive and imposing. It brings together the materials from which civilization may be evolved, but it is not itself an example of compound evolution. The notion that war can perfect the internal adaptations of national life, the finer adjustments of sectional, racial, or class interests, has no historical justification.

Can it be said that the attempt of our southern brethren to solve by war, or of the federal government to solve by the essentially militaristic policies of reconstruction, the terrible problem of race interests were successful?

This, then, is the evolutionist's case against war. It can hasten social integration, but in the measure that it succeeds, it prevents or postpones those finer and endlessly varied adaptations which require freedom and time, and upon which completeness of life depends. War has rudely assembled the factors of civilization, but the possible recurrence of war menaces civilization from this time forth.

## Can war then be outlawed and generally prevented?

I suppose that there is substantial agreement among economists and historians that the prevailing causes of war have been hunger and greed. These conditions create tension and provoke contention. They do not, however, inevitably produce war. The sociologist may go far with economist and historian in recognizing economic causes in history, but he may not lose sight of other factors, which it is peculiarly the province of his own science to analyze and evaluate. These factors are psychological, and without their co-operation war does not begin. The passions of men must be consolidated. Consuming hatred or fierce exaltation must merge individual wills in the collective fury of the psychologic crowd.

Even then war does not follow if the fury merely bursts. An explosion may make hell writ small, and war is hell writ large, but their resemblance ends. An explosion in the open does no work, and war is systematic work. To make war, the public fury must so far be controlled that it can discharge itself only through the mechanism of a military organization, in a series of regulated explosions, directed upon a definite object, until its infernal task is done.

Failure to remember this incontrovertible fact has had unfortunate consequences for historical theory and for political ethics. How does the control of public wrath arise? In what does it consist? Through what agents or agencies does it direct this fearful power, dissipating it in peace, or aggregating it for war?

Now habits are acquired, we say, by doing things or thinking things many times over. That is true, but it is not all. The repetitions that make up habit are imitations; they are copies of models or examples. Many of our elemental and most useful habits are imitations of parents; but plainly, if we imitated parents only, there would be no national traits, and, in the strict sense of the word, no nations. There would be only some millions of families, each abiding by its own mental and moral law. National habits, and therefore national traits and character, are copies of those relatively conspicuous models that are widely imitated, irrespective of kinship; imitated locally at first, perhaps, but at length throughout a population.

If so much be granted, a further and profoundly significant truth is granted by implication. Conspicuous or dynamic men who become models to thousands or millions of their fellows, are true social causes, and centers of social control. As they think, the multitude thinks; as they do, the multitude does, and for the most part unconsciously, every man believing that he thinks or acts spontaneously, and because it is his nature to think or to act so, and not otherwise.

Is not the conclusion obvious? Men in positions of authority, whether, as they believe, by divine right, or, as others think, by human choice, are necessarily conspicuous. Often, they are men of power, and whether they would have it so or not, their decisions become to some extent the popular decision, and their voice becomes in part the people's voice. Without dictation or argument, and solely because their choice is spontaneously copied, and their course of action is uncritically followed by multitudes that swear the choice was theirs, these men control, and controlling direct, the public complaisance and the public wrath. In the final throwing of the dice of fate, they are causes of peace and war.

From this sober conclusion of inductive science, I confess I see no escape. That it is in harmony with an unsophisticated moral prejudice is not, I wish to believe, a reason for distrusting it. The conscience of civilized mankind has never yet admitted that deliberately declared war has been irresponsibly begun. Rather has it held, that great men in all ages, as molders of opinion and ministers of state, have been moral agents, rightly to be branded with infamy when, for their own aggrandizement or glory, they have drawn the sword.

One rule of policy then, it would seem, may fairly be derived from sociological theory for the discouragement of war. It is right and expedient to teach that exceptional men, and especially all emperors and presidents and ministers of state, are not puppets of the *Zeitgeist*, but, in a scientific sense of the word, are true social causes, and, as such, are morally responsible for the maintenance of peace.

Beyond policies to restrain the makers of war, are there policies which might render the making of war more difficult?

The conditions preventive or inhibitive of war have been three, namely: isolation, the inclusion of minor states within confederations or imperial systems, and the so-called balance of power.

In the past mere inaccessibility of territory has assured the relatively peaceful development of many peoples, among whom some have made priceless contributions to civilization. There are no inaccessible nations now. Political integration has continually widened the areas within which domestic peace prevails, and the work is so far done that no important lands or peoples remain to be appropriated. Further integration will be redistributive only. There remains the balance of power, as the one important objective condition upon which the maintenance of peace will largely depend.

I am using the term in a general or descriptive, not a technical or diplomatic, sense. I mean by it political forces in approximate equilibrium throughout the world. In this sense the balance of power is a sociological phenomenon of peculiar interest, for two reasons.

First, it is interesting because of its nature or composition. It is a distribution of forces roughly in accordance with what the mathematician calls "chance occurrence." If as many as a thousand shots are fired at a target, those that miss the bulls-eye are distributed about it with curious regularity. Of those that miss it by three inches, about as many will hit above as below, about as many to the left as to the right. Of those that miss it by six inches, about as many will hit right as left, about as many below as above. In like manner a balance of power is a symmetrical distribution of forces about a central point. An international balance of power exists when, with reference to any interest or question upon which states may differ, as many strong powers range themselves on one side as on the other, and the weak ones are symmetrically distributed with reference to the strong ones.

Government by discussion depends upon a balance of power and necessarily proceeds from it. It is a social expansion of the reasoning processes of the individual mind.

Reasoning begins when instinct fails or is inhibited. So long as we can confidently act, we do not argue, but when we face conditions abounding in uncertainty or when we are confronted by alternative possibilities, we first hesitate, then feel our way, then guess, and at length venture to reason. Reasoning, accordingly, is that action of the mind to which we resort when the possibilities before us and about us are distributed substantially according to the law of chance occurrence, or, as the mathematician would say, in accordance with "the normal curve" of random frequency. The moment the curve is obviously skewed, we decide. If it is obviously skewed from the beginning, by bias, or interest, by prejudice, authority, or coercion, our reasoning is futile or imperfect. So, in the state, if any interest or coalition of interests is dominant and can act promptly, it rules by absolutist methods. Whether it is benevolent or cruel, it wastes neither time nor resources upon government by discussion. But if interests are innumerable, and so distributed as to offset one another, and if no great bias or over-weighting anywhere appears, government by discussion inevitably arises. The interests can get together only if they talk. So, too, in international relations. If in coming years these shall be adjusted by reason instead of by force, by arbitration instead of by war, it will be because a true balance of power has been attained. If any one power or coalition of powers shall be able to dictate, it will also rule, and the appeal to reason will be vain.

By what policies can an equilibrium of international power be established? I shall only name those that the foregoing considerations suggest, and not attempt to describe or to analyze them. They must of course be policies that will tend both to differentiate interests and to disintegrate coalitions of power that create an

overwhelming preponderance of strength. The great superiorities that now preclude effective government by discussion throughout the world are, (1) technical proficiency based on scientific knowledge, and (2) concentrated economic power. If we sincerely wish for peace, we must be willing to see a vast equalizing of industrial efficiency between the East and the West. We must also welcome every change that tends to bring about a fairer apportionment of natural resources among nations and within them, and a more equal distribution of wealth. If these conditions can be met, there will be a Parliament of Man. If they cannot be met, a nominal government by discussion will be but a tournament of words.

### *Questions for Contemplation and Discussion*

1. What is the difference between social theory and *sociology*, according to Giddings? Why is the latter a historical advance for public policy?
2. Giddings mentions several social problems of his day. Have these social problems been cured? What advances of knowledge have taken place in each of these areas? If you were to create a list of the five most important social problems today, how would this list compare to Giddings' list?
3. Giddings uses Spencerian concepts of social evolution to evaluate war. What are the problems of war, looked at this way?
4. What does sociology add to our understanding of the causes of war, different from what is proposed by economists or historians?
5. What three conditions have been advanced for limiting war? Which is most persuasive to Giddings, and why? To you?
6. In the discussion of balance of power, note Giddings' statistically-minded analogy of central tendency.