



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

I. Edward A. Ross on Social Control (1900)

“The wall between classes is least passable when it runs along the abyss that divides race from race, or people from people.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from an article published as “Class Control” in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1900 (volume 6, number 3, pages 381-395). This was actually the second of a two-part series. Although the overall focus of the series was on social control generally, the passage below focuses on class control as an important and problematic specific form. It has been reproduced here with only minor modifications.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

In this article, Ross sharply critiques what he calls “class control,” and seeks to explain how this comes to be, how it is maintained, and how it can be contested. It may be useful to reconsider the writings of Marx while reading this selection. Pay special attention to how Ross, writing as he does in the U.S., with its intractable racial tensions, includes race relations in his discussion of class control.

Social Control

Inhibiting impulses radiate not only from the social mass, but also from certain centers of extraordinary prestige and influence. Control under these circumstances is still social. But when the chief center of such inhibition is a class living at the expense of the rest of the community, we no longer have social control in the true sense, but class control. This may be defined as the exercise of power by a parasitic class in its own interest.

There are various devices by means of which a body of persons may sink their fangs into their fellows and subsist upon them. Slavery, or the immediate and absolute disposal over the labor force of another, is the primary form of the parasitic relation. By modifying this into serfdom the parasitic class, without in the least abating its power of securing nourishment from others, places itself in a position more convenient to it and less irritating to the exploited. When the absolute state comes into being, that direct absorption of nutriment by the parasite from the host, which characterizes feudalism, falls a little into the background. For example, the French state, as it existed under the old regime, was a vast coercing apparatus that collected goods from the producers by means of taxation and redistributed them among the favored parasites by means of royal patronage. Finally, the institution of property is so shaped as to permit a slanting exploitation under which a class is able to live in idleness by monopolizing land or other indispensable natural means of production.

These successive modulations of parasitism obey the principle of economy. To economize coercion, to economize supervision, to economize direction – these are the motives which led masters to substitute for the coarse and direct kinds of exploitation refined and slanting kinds of exploitation. During this transition a great many personal rights come to be recognized by the exploiters. The slave has no rights at all as against his master. The serf directs his own labor and looks out for his own keep but is bound to the glebe. The subject of the absolute state is free to labor and to move about, to own and to sell as he pleases, but he must meet the heavy demands of the tax-gatherer. In the legal state the exploited is conceded as many personal freedoms as the exploiter, but she must scrupulously respect the rights conferred by ownership.

In this expansion of rights there is a gradual escape of the person from the grasp of the parasite. More and more she becomes master of herself and of the fruits of her toil after she has rendered certain fixed dues to the master. The tremendous stimulus that such enfranchisement gives to the energy and capacity of the producers invariably causes a considerable accumulation of wealth in the hands of the non-parasites which veils the parasitic relation from incurious eyes.

Besides these changes in form which make it less harsh and palpable, social parasitism is further softened and attenuated by changes in the personnel of the exploiting and the exploited classes. The wall between these classes is least passable when it runs along the abyss that divides race from race, or people from people. The parasitic relation, pure and simple, is founded on unlikeness and transmitted by heredity. Those of noble blood have a perpetual claim to gratuitous support. Those who are base-born are under a perpetual obligation to render dues.

Now the grimness of this situation is mitigated as soon as members of the superior class are liable to forfeit their places on the dais, while certain of the inferior may for signal merit be promoted to seats among the privileged. The heaving and strain of the wretches crammed in the hold of a slaver is less if, now and then, a few of the most redoubtable are let up on deck. Likewise the admitting of a few brave, talented, or successful commoners into the charmed circle above has a wonderful effect in calming the rage and envy of the exploited, and thereby protracting the life of the parasitic system. In the absolute monarchy the yielding to capable commoners of a fair proportion of the rich posts and sinecures in state, army, and church is recognized as an excellent means of prolonging the hold of the nobles upon the remainder. The short-sightedness of the French parasite orders on this point was one cause of their premature downfall; while, by timely and ample concessions to the new industrial elite, their brethren in England have, so far, saved their estates and their monopoly of the best offices.

The ennobling of new fortunes, the opening of careers to talent, the equalizing of opportunities, the dissolving of the hereditary classes through one another, and the increase of the social capillarity that facilitates the free ascent or descent of men in the social scale according to their personal fitness are the successive steps by which a society of parasites and hosts passes over into a hierarchy of classes graded according to success in a fair competition.

No people will toil and sweat to keep a class in idleness and luxury unless cajoled or compelled to do so. The parasitic class is, therefore, always a ruling class, and utilizes as many as it can of the means of control. But it is not by the means used that we can best distinguish this class control from social control. If we would know the real tenor of a control, we should scrutinize the laws, obligations, and exceptions which it upholds.

In other words, it is by studying the constitution of the society that we learn if there is a parasitic relation and discover who are the parasites and who are the hosts. It is what men obey, rather than why they obey, that betrays the presence of class exploitation.

For instance, those pressures which reach the individual through the suggestion and opinion of those close about him cannot well be turned to account by the parasitic class. The immediate influences to which the slave, serf, or peasant is exposed come from his afflicted fellows, from those who share his lowly station and lot, and who, like himself, are under the harrow.

Their encouragement, indeed, will often fortify him in defiance and resistance of his spoilers.

Likewise, it is impracticable for the ruling class to manage their subjects by skillfully molding the personal ideals and valuations that reign in the social deeps. These are likely to shape themselves among the oppressed people quite independently of the will of the master. Indeed, she may count herself lucky if they do not antagonize her purposes in every way.

As unlikeness of interests, education, and mode of life forbids exploiters and exploited to share intimately a common life, there is between them little of the give-and-take that readily establishes itself among true associates. The leeches as a class cannot apply to the bled as a class any of those delicate pressures on the spirit, those volatile, suasive forms of psychic coercion, which bear upon the individual so long as she is among comrades and equals. It is safe, then, to lay it down as a rule that only those inhibitive impulses which flow from a central determinate source can be controlled by a predaceous class.

Thus, suggestion and public opinion are hardly come-at-able by an organization of seigneurs, because they do not flow out from a central source. They distill upon one from all sides. It is easy to poison a well; but to poison the dew – that is quite another thing!

While, on the other hand, the checks and stimuli connected with religion, art, personality, and personal ideals do flow out from central sources, they cannot be reached for another reason. Because they emanate from the great man, the prophet, or the spiritual elite, their source is not determinate. They spring up, now here, now there. It is now this little knot of enthusiasts, and now that, which radiates these impulses. Vainly does the crafty, ruling class seek to control them and get them to do its work. It gains possession of the spring, but the spring forthwith dries up or turns bitter. It suborns the prophet, and his inspiration leaves him. It seduces the hero, and his followers miss the old charm in him and fall away. It wins over the singer, and lo! her voice rings cracked and false. It takes the ministers of religion into its pay, and behold! the people leave the appointed sanctuaries and hang on the burning words of some wild-eyed fanatic from the hills – a Shepherd of Tekoa, for instance, or a Piers Ploughman.

It is chiefly, then, upon such engines of control as the supple hand can easily reach and manipulate that a ruling class must rely. Its best tools will be law, belief in the supernatural, instruction, custom, ceremony, and illusion. These are the agents that, from the nature of the case, we should expect the ruling class to employ.

But what are the facts? The props of parasitic rule, as history has revealed them over and over again, are force, superstition, fraud, pomp, and prescription. At first glance there appears to be a discrepancy here, but in a moment it is clear that these are simply degenerate forms of certain familiar supports of social order.

What is force but the coarse, physical compulsion of law, without law's guarantees for the moderate and scrupulous exercise of this compulsion? What is superstition but a kind of belief in supernatural sanctions which in no wise springs up from the natural longing to see the iniquities of this world righted by the just decrees of the next? Fraud is one form of illusion. Pomp is ceremony, intended to impress, not the individual entering upon new responsibilities, but the envious, presuming populace. Prescription is that sanctity of custom which attaches to the social edifice within which we have been reared.

These favorite instruments of the parasitic orders resemble the corresponding instruments in the service of society, and yet they have a ring and temper of their own. Both use force; but the force that society applies is felt by all concerned to be less arbitrary, less "brute," than the force a class uses against its victims. Both teach religion; but genuine social religion is the cult of fellowship, while the religion an upper class provides for a lower is the cult of obedience.

Each of the well-marked classes that incline to parasitism has its favorite and characteristic means of control. Soldiers rely on physical force, and hence the rule of the military caste is characterized by brutality. Priests naturally avail themselves of superstition and fraud, and so their domination is marked by hypocrisy and craft. Nobles, after they have lost their military virtues and become chiefly ornamental, impress with pomp and show, and hence their rule is marked by pride and, since only riches can keep up external splendor, by rapacity.

All control is consecrated by age, and becomes prescriptive. Hence every ruling class becomes in time exceedingly conservative. But no single class is long allowed to sit alone in the seats of the mighty. Unless it shares with them its privileges and advantages, other power-holders in society will combine for its overthrow. So there is a natural tendency for all power-holders to get together, sink their differences, and organize one great exploiting trust.

As Europe emerged from the Dark Ages various social parasites appeared, one after the other -lords of the soil, the princes, the papacy, the financiers. By playing off one parasitic interest against another, the free townsmen and the peasants shook off, for a time, their tormentors. But the princes and the rich townsmen, joining forces, ruined the lesser nobles and reduced the rest to loyal courtiers. By nationalizing the church, or by seizing ecclesiastical property and patronage, the princes then deprived the papacy of much of its power of preying upon the rest of society, and compelled that close alliance of throne and altar which was so helpful to the growth of monarchy.

In France, before the Revolution, all the chief means of spoliation, the ownership of the soil, taxation, spiritual prerogatives, and finance contributed to feed a monstrous wen which was fastened by all ligaments that can attach a parasitic growth, and which drew to itself most of the juices in the social body.

A predatory minority, then, presents itself at first as a governing class that by its toils, cares, and risks contrives to draw to itself the surplus goods of the governed. But, at a later stage of development, enjoyment and control are no longer vested in the same persons. The anatomy of a parasitic organization now shows at the center certain idle enjoyers surrounded by a great number of unproductive laborers who share in their spoil, and who in return busy themselves, as retainers, mercenaries, police, priests, teachers, or publicists, in intimidating, cajoling, or beguiling the exploited majority. It is at this stage of parasitism that the contrivances for holding down the exploited are the most varied and interesting.

The art of employing the organized collective might in the systematic keeping of order appears to have been developed by a ruling class rather than by the undifferentiated social whole. Common observation shows us that, in the nature of the case, a union that has for its purpose the mutual defense of the claims of each member against outsiders is easier to form and maintain than a union for the mutual guarantee of the claims of each member against the aggressions of his fellow-members. Owing to the clash of interests in the bosom of each adherent, the instituting of the latter union is by far the more difficult feat of joinery.

Now, in a society composed of a predaceous class and a subject mass, that is to say, of spoilers and spoiled, the coercive power develops readily out of a kind of mutual-defense (and offense!) association among the spoilers. In a simple society, on the other hand, it presupposes something like a mutual guarantee association, and is, therefore, not likely to arise at so early a point in social development. This conjecture is confirmed by the growing mass of evidence which goes to show that the historical state has, in almost every instance, taken its origin in the violent superposition of one people upon another. Begun in aggression and perfected in exploitation, the state, even now when it is more and more directed by the common will, is not easy to keep from slipping back into the rut it wore for itself during the centuries it was the engine of a parasitic class. The means whereby the minority can physically overpower and hold down the majority are many and well understood. They arm, train, and organize themselves as did the Spartans. Like the Normans they build themselves strongholds and castles. They girdle themselves with mercenaries as the princes of the old regime surrounded themselves with Swiss. They sow the seeds of enmity among their victims after the manner of the Hapsburgs in dealing with their subject peoples. They deprive them of weapons as the Spartans did the helots. Like the West India planters they prevent them from meeting, seeing, or communicating with one another. They keep them ignorant, following the policy of the southern slave-owners. They cut off their natural leaders as did the Roman masters. They break their spirit with overwork. They terrorize them with cruelties. They keep them under constant surveillance, as in classic times the slaves on Sicilian estates were chained by day and penned underground by night. By such policies it has been found practicable for a parasitic band to hold down many times their number.

But this technique of coercion calls into being a counter-technique of freedom. In England, for instance, where the intruding Normans had brought the instruments of rule to a rare perfection, the industrial classes, long before they were able to master and use government for their own ends, had learned to safeguard themselves by hedging it with certain checks. With their acquired rights they built a rampart against the formidable engine in the hands of their spoilers. The right to bind law upon the sovereign, the right to forbid a standing army in time of peace, the right of citizens to assemble, to petition, to keep and bear arms, to be secure from unreasonable searches and seizures, to suffer only on trial and conviction, to be tried by their peers, and to be exempt from cruel or unusual punishments, availed to strip the class state of its most dreaded powers, and have justly come to be looked upon as the attributes of a free people. In this way force has become law and might have been transmuted into right.

It is scarcely necessary to point out that fraud, although used freely by every exploiting class, is a favorite instrument of the class that aspires to the mastery of the mind.

Over against fraud and superstition has been elaborated a technique of enlightenment. Freedom of meeting, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the inviolability of the mails, the autonomy of institutions of learning, the liberty of investigation, the freedom of teaching, the free public university, the free open library—not without good cause have these come to be prized by democratic peoples.

Once the material foundations of its rule have crumbled an aristocratic class inevitably comes to attach great importance to pomp and circumstance. Pageantry, which is originally the swollen crimson crest of lordly pride, becomes an obligation and a solemnity when the nobility is no longer a match for the commonalty in physical contest. As the lords lose their power over the bodies of their subjects it is the more necessary to consider the impression on their minds. Accordingly, the exterior of upper-class life comes in time to be regulated with an eye to the effect on the lower orders. Outwardly the mode of life of the rulers must be as far as possible differentiated from that of the ruled, in order that the former may be looked upon as beings apart. But the splendor with which nobles surround their actions, both public and private, is costly, and hence leads to that insatiable rapacity which characterizes over-ripe aristocracies, and which so often leads them to ruin.

Simplicity, on the other hand, comes in as class rule disappears. In the democratic era the need of solemn ostentation passes away, and the wealthy employ their riches in keeping up a manner of life very different from that of the great in the aristocratic era. Moreover, government is conducted with less of state, and the ceremony that is still retained for public occasions is religious and ethical in character rather than spectacular.

Finally, a ruling class profits by prescription. For the secret of the stability of an oppressive social system is not always in the weapons or even in the prestige of the class that sits aloft. Whatever be the relations it fixes between master and slave, lord and serf, priest and flock, prince and subject, the system by its very existence utters an imperious suggestion which few can resist.

Those who have the sunny rooms in the social edifice have, therefore, a powerful ally in the suggestion of Things-as-they-are. With the aid of a -little narcotizing teaching and preaching, the denizens of the cellar may be brought to find their lot proper and right, to look upon escape as an outrage upon the rights of other classes, and to spurn with moral indignation the agitator who would stir them to protest. Great is the magic of precedent, and like the rebellious helots who cowered at the sight of their masters' whips, those who are used to dragging the social chariot will meekly open their calloused mouths whenever the bit is offered them.

This is why the social arrangements of new countries become the revolutionary models for old societies. The colonist, no longer in the overawing presence of an ancient system, reverts to first principles. Squaring his institutions with his native sense of justice and fitness he frames a social system that becomes a wonder and a terror to the usurping classes among older peoples.

When their minds have been depolarized the desires of the exploited people fly up like a released spring and the social classes jar angrily together. The social system is seen in its nakedness, and, unless enough physical force is found to uphold it, it is sure to be modified.

In order not to mistake social control for class control it is necessary to distinguish between a parasitic society and a society that is truly competitive. In respect to economic friction and the contrasts of worldly condition, a competitive society may present much the same appearance as a society composed of exploiters and exploited. Yet there is between them one great difference, a difference which has everything to do with the volume and kind of control that will be needed to preserve social order.

In a really competitive society the hopelessly poor and wretched are, to a large extent, the weak and incompetent who have accumulated at the lower end of the social scale because they or their parents have failed to meet the tests of the competitive system. In a society cleft by parasitism, on the other hand, the poor are poor because they are held under the harrow, and not because they are less capable and energetic than the classes that prey upon them.

Now, a class of beaten people, a proletariat from which the industrially fittest have escaped or are escaping, has neither the will nor the strength to strain against the social system with the vigor of a resentful proletariat held down and exploited by means of artificial social arrangements. However sharply it may differentiate, however rude the clash of conflicting interests, a competitive society will still require no such elaborate apparatus of control as a parasitic society, with perhaps no greater contrasts of economic condition, will find it necessary to maintain. Moreover, its control will not exhibit the traits of class control, but will show the sincerity, spontaneity, and elasticity that mark the control that is truly social.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. How would you characterize Ross' style? Does he remind you of any of our classical theorists? In what ways? Do you see why he may have gotten into trouble at Stanford, an institution created by a member of what Ross would call "the parasitic class"?¹
2. Explain the meaning of "parasitic class" and "ruling class" and the connections between the two.
3. What are "the best tools" of control at the hand of the ruling class?
4. Compare Ross' theories with those of Marx. What is similar? What is different? Marx has been hugely more influential than Ross – why might that be?
5. What is Ross' theory of the state? How does this compare to Weber's theory? Marx's?
6. Read the last sections very carefully. What is the difference between a parasitic and a competitive society? How would you characterize our own? How might Marx respond to this theoretical dichotomy?

1. Leland Stanford, the founder of the University, has been referred to as a "railroad tycoon." It may interest you to read more about his life and the early years of Stanford University.