



Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology

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Publication and on-going maintenance of this textbook is possible due to grant support from [Oregon State University Ecampus](https://ecampus.oregonstate.edu/).

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EARLY AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

I. Small on the Sociological Point of View (1920)

“To live well we need to understand the circumstances that surround our attempts to live.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from an article entitled “The Sociologists’ Point of View,” published in the *American Journal of Sociology* in 1897, pages 145–171. It has been abbreviated for publication here.

Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

It is fitting to end this section with this passage, as it sums up what is unique and important about sociology in the US during this period. Albion Small was one of the first professors of sociology in the United States. Similar to Durkheim in France, he took it upon himself to champion this new discipline. Although he does not have the same intellectual depth as Durkheim, and does not articulate any novel theoretical ideas, his piece on the sociologists’ point of view is an important historical statement defining sociology in the US context. Pay attention to the links Small makes between progressive politics, social reform, and the science of sociology.

The Sociologists’ Point of View

The fact which has begotten sociology is a dawning social consciousness. As in no previous age of the world’s history men are with one voice inquiring “What are the facts and the forces that make or mar social life?” Sociology is not, like many of the systems of thought that have attracted men before, the amusement of recluse philosophers. Sociology is a frank attempt to assist in supplying a real popular demand. It springs from the people’s thought, not alone from the lucubrations of closet speculators. At the same time sociology attempts to inform and control the very popular thought by which it has been inspired. The concrete popular demand is for specifics Sociology is devoted to showing that specifics, if they could be invented, would not long satisfy the demand, and it is further bent on showing that something may presently be had better than specifics.

Practical men of all sorts and conditions are beginning to inquire whether social conditions may not, to a thus far unsuspected degree, be like our food, our clothes, and our shelter—something to be thought out, and planned, and systematically constructed. More men than ever before are at least dimly aware that it is needful to give deliberate thought to social arrangements, instead of allowing society to happen into shape. This more general perception is spurring the sociologists to perfect their methods. Popular unrest and scientific curiosity are together asking the question “What are the inside facts about human society?” The first division

of the work which the sociologists are undertaking is the task of making clear to the different kinds of people who are trying to solve social problems what division and organization of labor is necessary in order to progress as fast as possible in answering this general question, with all the minor questions which it involves and implies.

This paper is addressed, not to specialists, but to the many thoughtful students of social questions who are anxious to know whether there is some best way of thinking about social relations. Nor is it my purpose to glorify sociology and sociologists. Only a very small fraction of the people who are doing the work which is necessary before searching questions about society can be answered are now or are likely to be called sociologists. The sociologists are one class among many workers in a common field. The whole field, not a narrow portion of it claimed by particular specialists, interests members of society in general. Yet in some respects the sociologists have more in common with the non-professional many than have any other group of technical students of society. The point of view of the sociologists is that of the social person of every sort, rather than that of the specialist. For this reason it is worthwhile to explain with the least possible technicality, not what the sociologists claim as their peculiar province or mission, but rather the point of view which the sociologists think everybody should occupy who ventures to hold or to seek opinions about any kind of social relations.

The starting point of the sociologists, then, is frank belief that the best of us are as yet comparatively ignorant about the inside facts of society, and that thoroughgoing study of society is necessary. The majority of the people in the world have yet to be convinced that study of society is important. I might discuss those scholars who more or less directly contend that all necessary study of society is sufficiently provided for. I am just now more concerned with those unscholarly persons who either tacitly or expressly set themselves against the necessity of any study of society at all.

“Why need we study society?”

The first answer to this inept question would seem to be on the face of the fact that nature is one factor and society another with which every human being has to deal. If it is profitable to study nature, it surely is to study society. Society is simply all the people together in any part of the world which may be thought of by itself. “Society” is our town. It is the United States. It is the group of civilized nations with which Americans have intercourse. It is again the whole human family. If we do not use the word in the remote sense that places “society” beyond the range of ordinary interest, it seems that the word means only something so very commonplace that study of it is rather beneath what we suppose to be our dignity. We have “society,” like the poor, always with us. It is perfectly familiar. Why study it?

People have asked the same question about all familiar things when it was first proposed to study them, and build up scientific knowledge about them. People had breathed air, for example, thousands of years before it occurred to anybody to study air. When scholars began to talk about studying air ordinary people laughed at them. “The idea of studying air! Why not study something worthwhile? Everybody knows all about air.” It proved, however, that nobody really knew much of anything precisely about air. People did not so much as know that air is heavy, that it is elastic, that it is a mixture of gases, etc. People said the same thing when scholars talked of studying water, either physically or chemically. They said the same thing about the

beginnings of the study of plant and animal life—biology. President G. Stanley Hall is fond of recalling the farmer to whom some students of biology had applied for help to find frogs for study. “What is there to study about frogs? I know all about frogs myself. I’ve got a whole pond full of them down there.” So our very familiarity with society has kept us from stopping to think about society in a way to make us understand society.

From the sociologists’ point of view, then, we need to study society because it is the surrounding, the “environment,” as the biologists say, in which all of us live and move and have our being. It is stupid and costly to let our thoughts about society be vague or wrong or partial. To live well we need to understand the circumstances that surround our attempts to live. The sociologists propose systematic study of society in order to develop the power and the habit of seeing society, and seeing into society, and seeing through and around society, for the sake of power to see beyond society as it exists today and into social conditions that may be desirable and possible tomorrow.

Most people never see what they see. A parlor game sometimes called “Observation” makes amusement out of this fact. A score or more of small objects are scattered upon a tray, and the players are instructed to file by the table and notice the objects. Then, upon pain of forfeit for each omission, the players are called upon to write a list of the articles on the tray. The results always illustrate the fact that we seldom see all that we see. This is notoriously true of social relations. Only a few exceptional people have seen, for example, that a part of our own life is lived by people miles away, whose names we have never heard. Because certain men in Montana or the Argentine or Australia have raised a particular breed of sheep, we are able to wear some parts of the clothing at this moment on our bodies. Those distant people have been dressing us for years, while we have given scarce a thought to their existence. Who puts fork and spoon in our mouth at today’s dinner? Not our hand alone. Some men have been raising wheat in Dakota, and potatoes in Michigan; others have been boiling salt in New York, others picking coffee in Java, and drying tea in Japan, and gathering spices in the isles of the sea; and porters have carried on their backs, and loaded on drays, and sails have strained, and boilers have steamed, and officials have inspected, and merchants have sworn, and traders have broken bulk, and factory hands have labored – all in the course of setting our table. If the family next door to some of us in the city should move away or die, nothing worth noticing might be subtracted from our life. If those thousands of people in distant parts of our own land or beyond seas should stop living and working, great sections of our own life would cease. This is merely a specification under the well-known and ill-known formula, “None of us liveth to himself.” *The monster known to theory as “the individual” does not exist except in theorists’ speculations.* The man who thinks himself an independent individual has put an optical illusion in place of himself. We human beings are what we are because we are parts of society. What society is decides what we are and what we may be.

There are still further reasons for the study of society. Sooner or later thoughtful people discover that society is a collection of problems; people have to tackle these problems. Improvement of life means solution of these problems. In order to render any intelligent assistance in solving these problems we must study society sufficiently to make the problems real to our own mind.

These social problems, as proposed by complainers, and agitators, and “reformers,” and seers of every sort, prove upon inspection to be larger or smaller parts of certain greater problems like these: What are we human beings actually living for? What are we trying to bring about, on the whole, as the outcome of living? Are we making the best use of our resources to reach these ends that we have in view? What is the best

that we might live for, if we took a little wiser look into the situation, and calculated the possibilities of life a little more broadly and deeply? We cannot dissolve this social partnership if we would. How may we make it closer, and better adapted to secure these better results? All the questions about wealth, labor, monopolies, trusts, forms of government, administrative policies, class relationships; all questions of justice and morality between people, are parts and details and variations of the great problem of knowing society as the real fact, the largest, most meaning reality that we touch in actual life.

One of the reasons why we have to put up with social disturbance in the place of social progress today, why we have such strifes of tongues and opinions instead of instruction fit to improve life, is another version of the answer to our question, viz., we are so anxious to solve social problems that we have no time to study society. The consequence is that their solutions do not solve. Worse than this, their agitations create more problems. The shortest way to reachability to solve social problems is not to try to solve them at all for a long time, but to learn how to state them. To most of those who share the feverishness of our day to extemporize social solutions this program seems to demand waste of too much valuable time. On the contrary, those who are intelligently following this program, by studying partially understood factors in society instead of trying to cipher out social problems whose terms cannot yet be definitely expressed, are making haste slowly, to be sure, but they are making haste.

The sociologist naturally differs in judgment from those people who claim superior merit as humanitarians and moralists or refusing to acquire the necessary knowledge about society, who prefer instead to scourge the air with exhortations to reform institutions they do not understand. Specific doctrines and policies about "living issues" are by no means the only nor the surest reliance for improving the world. The sociologist would be the last person to approve the policy of folding the hands and waiting until we are omniscient before trying to help ourselves. As public-spirited citizens sociologists would cooperate with all other good citizens in doing the best things in sight to make life more satisfactory. However, in the long run the kind of intelligence which can bring about wise adjustments to new conditions is more serviceable and reliable than mere zeal for expedients, for these may serve at best only a temporary purpose. The student of society ought to have enough decision of character to commit herself both in thought and action on such subjects as the tariff, the currency, internal taxation, public policy towards monopolies, and the demands of the numberless "interests" that seek legislative help. The wise student of society will at the same time, even in his most sanguine moods, steady herself with the reflection that the best of her beliefs and programs about current "issues" are of subordinate importance after all. It makes relatively little difference what we think about specific cases. They may be exceptional and temporary. Our views about them may become obsolete at any moment through change of circumstances. It makes a great deal of difference whether we are intelligent about abiding relationships. Very much depends upon our general outlook upon society; upon our spirit about life, upon insight into permanent elements of human character and conditions. Our personal equation in these respects will make us forces for evil or good, for progress or regress, in spite of changed circumstances.

To illustrate the sociologists' view of the ways in which we must learn to study society, in order to get what we can discover into truthful shape, let us imagine that we are for the first time confronting the question, what are the inside facts of society?

Let us suppose that this question had never been asked before. Suppose that we had meanwhile acquired all the ideas of logic, and of science, and of the laws of scientific evidence which we now possess. How would we go to work to discover the inside facts of society?

We would say to ourselves, the thing that we want to understand is this immemorial complex of cooperating people in which we find ourselves forming a part during our passing day. The fact that greets our eyes is that people fill the world; they crowd upon each other; they express in outward action their inward thought. This expression of thought brings things to pass. It makes and remakes the mold of institutions within which individual careers are pursued. It modifies people. It transforms all the human elements in the world. This human action and reaction is, on the one hand, never the same in two successive years. On the other hand, it is all one endless, incessant, indivisible process from beginning to end. The people on the stage of action never change all together and at once. They relieve each other in relays or shifts. There is total substitution of actors after a while, but by such means that unbroken continuity of action is preserved. It is all one long, mixed, mysterious commingling process. To our first view it is simply continuance. We can not find its beginning; we cannot find its end. People have lived together and rubbed against each other, and so have produced all our ways of life, such as they are.

Can we grasp all this in a single view that will help us hold it before the mind's eye for inspection? Yes, we can sum it up in one word—association or society—always meaning by it *human* association or society. That word gives us a unified object of thought. *It does not explain anything that we want to know, but it presents the thing to be explained as a single concept.* The implications of this concept are to be discovered, and we have only put the stupendously complex question in more convenient shape when we have reduced it to the easy form. What are the facts about association or society? The term society stands for all the people whose presence within the world-making process, at any time, earlier or later, has in any degree affected the process. Society, then, means the total of effective human beings working in their various ways within the bounds of time and space which our human career has occupied. It is reasonable to assume that this time and space-filling reality—society—has exhibited some regularities and irregularities capable of formulation in general propositions. It is probable that human associations, closely scrutinized, will demonstrate qualities of the human factors concerned. It is likely that there are general principles of action and effect illustrated in all this mass and variety of association. It is to be assumed that if our minds could take in all that has occurred among people—we should have a systematized body of knowledge about the operative forces wherever people are in association. It is probable that this body of knowledge would serve to make us more intelligent in the future than we have been in the past about social conduct. Let us, therefore, set ourselves to know this reality, society. Surely by such knowledge alone may we wisely order our lives.

We should find that all persons are associated persons. This discovery brings with it two results: first, to know the individual we shall have to follow him out of himself into his correlations with others; second, to know the correlations which are constituted by associations of people we must know their elements, as these are located in the make-up of the individuals who produce the associations. That is, while we may distinguish the phases of knowledge needed by the standpoint—whether individual or collective—from which we begin a particular research, the knowledges always run into each other, and find themselves, at last, either as like parts of larger wholes, or as respectively less and more inclusive portions of the same whole. For instance, if we are studying the life of a town, we may deal in turn with its physiography, natural and artificial; its industries; its government; its educational, charitable, artistic, social, or devotional institutions. Each of these portions of the whole called “the town” is meaningless or deceptive if held separate from the other

parts. Then there may be more minute analysis of each of these segments or systems within the town, as, for example, the school system, the things so discovered being subordinate parts in one of the many large divisions of the group.

In pursuing this way of approach to the inside facts of society we should presently find ourselves asking in turn all the questions which the biologist asks about life in general, and which the physiologist and the physical anthropologist ask about human life in particular. We should also find ourselves asking all the questions which the psychologist asks about the mental facts of individual action. In other words, we should encounter the need of developing the same sciences of individual life which have already started into existence without any help from sociology.

We should discover that there are facts or realities which do not in like fashion come to light merely in individuals. They have their incorporation in symbols or institutions by which we are controlled. Such realities are language, literature, religions, philosophies, sciences, arts, legal, economic, and governmental systems.

It has no doubt appeared in the foregoing that two general questions about the facts of society are inextricably involved with each other, viz.: first, how did social arrangements come to be as they are? Second, how does it come about that social arrangements stay as they are? The latter question seems to assume what is not true, but there is a phase of reality corresponding with the assumption. The former question sums up all the inquiries that belong to history in the broadest sense, as Herbert Spencer has outlined the business of history. Dr. Lester F. Ward has supplied a better phrase, when he groups all these facts and interpretations under the head "social genesis." The latter question sets in motion all the investigations which the sociologist would group under the general title of "social statics." Professor Ward has also clearly shown that the general truths formulated by genetic and statical interpretation of social facts may be grouped together under the term "social mechanics." Each of these groups of inquiries casts light on the other, and it is probable that progress toward final results will be by means of parallel advances toward settlement of the two sorts of questions.

What inferences should be drawn from this survey of social study, as the field would present itself to a naive mind equipped with right methodological principles, and unspoiled by conventions and prejudice? In the first place, the inference that pretentious generalizations about laws of social progress or social order must be regarded with grave suspicion, until the facts of human experience have been much more thoroughly canvassed than they are likely to be for generations to come. In the second place, that in preparation either for practical judgments upon immediate social conditions, or for larger philosophical generalizations of more typical conditions, it is worthwhile to acquire breadth and poise of judgment by the largest possible familiarity with what is known about social cause and effect in the past, and about reciprocal social influences in the present. In the third place, there is no likelihood that anybody will reach any central fact from which by deduction we can answer in detail, from general to special, the questions involved in the inquiry, What are the inside facts of society? There is accordingly no short cut or royal road to a comprehensive sociology. The sociological problem is in the first stage a collection of minor problems, either historical or contemporary. The people who will make permanent contributions to the development of social philosophy are those who will have patience to select distinct problems, and work upon them until the last available

evidence is collected, and the results are in shape to be organized into the whole body of social explanation. There is no special kind of fact which deserves to be called sociological *par excellence* in distinction from historical, or ethnological, or economic, or political, or demographic facts.

It is not true that problems of sociology fall within the province of other sciences. Sociology attempts to do what the more special sciences of society have very properly refused to do, viz., it confronts real conditions, while the other sciences deal with abstractions. But while abstraction is a necessary step to knowledge, it is not the final step. So soon as economist, political scientist, moralist, statistician, demographer, or sanitarian undertakes to explain, or in any way to deal with a whole social condition as it is encountered in reality – for instance, the relation of a school, a saloon, a trust, a political boss to the whole plexus of social relations—he steps out of his special province to tread a different soil, talk a different language, use different tools, and work at different tasks from those of his specialty, and then his abstraction will lead to perversion unless it is harmonized with other abstractions. This harmonizing, or synthesizing, or integrating process has not yet been sufficiently provided for in social science. In other words, the sociologist maintains that specialism is partialism unless it is organized into realism. The sociologist demands, therefore, that the light of all special social knowledge shall be thrown upon the actual activities of living people.

The sociologists are contending for a program, a perspective, and a method. They ask for correlation and cooperation of sciences, not for liberty to substitute a new science. The valid methodology of all the independent social sciences, organized from the point of view here outlined, and reinforced by the study of every actual concrete condition that contains any exhibit of permanent social forms and forces, must constitute that method. In conformity with this method each of the older divisions of research into facts about society not only retains its importance but greatly increases its importance. In isolation, sciences, or divisions of knowledge, or groups of investigations and conclusions, are meaningless. Organized so that each complements the rest they become eloquent. The point of view of the sociologists focalizes all possible researches about social facts into a composite picture of the whole reality.

In sociology, as in all the physical sciences, there are scholars who think that learning loses caste if it lends itself to any human use. These worthies should be humored as patiently as may be, and not taken too seriously. They do not materially weaken the general truth that present sociology frankly proposes the improvement of society as its final purpose. It would not require much argument to show that this purpose must evidently encounter distinct problems after all questions of fact have been answered. The great service and merit of the sociologists thus far has been in contending for correlation and integration of knowledge, and in pointing out that time will be saved in the end by making sure of our evidence. This is, however, a matter of method. After all available knowledge of society shall have been set in order the real task of the sociologists will begin. In addition to the genetic and the static interpretation of ascertained facts, there is another division of inquiry hinted at above, which had hardly been entered until certain sociologists began to explore it. Of all the facts with which social science has to do the most significant and potential are the facts about the feelings and judgments that actuate living men. Stripped of all conventionality, and reduced to most simple expression, the most practical question for students of society today is: What do living people think good for themselves, and what justification is there in the nature of things for these judgments? The power that stops or enforces all other social influence is the judgment that living men have accepted about what is desirable. What-ever may have been the prevalent form of moral philosophy, effective moral standards have always been the algebraic sum of concrete judgments about the things convenient for the persons judging. Not only this, but the nature of moral mechanics is such that when action is necessary no

other test of what is good for men is possible. No effort for human improvement is rational which aims to effect improvement in human action of a sort not recognizable as good by the persons concerned. In so far, then, as we regard human conditions as dependent upon the volitions of the persons within these conditions, we are forced back to the judgments of those persons respecting desirable conditions, as the standing ground of social influence—the starting point, the foundation, the fulcrum of progress. The necessary working basis of social improvement today is accordingly the body of judgments lodged in the minds of living men about the things that are essentially desirable. If it should be found that men today believe some things desirable which are demonstrably impossible, an obvious task of social education must be to chase from the popular mind all speculations after these impossibilities. If the things judged desirable are demonstrably self-contradictory, then a social and a sociological problem is to discover means of proving this incompatibility. If, however, the things deemed desirable are not opposed to known human uses, and are not prohibited by the facts of human conditions, the desire for them must be regarded as a veracious self-expression. It then becomes a social and a sociological task to interpret the desires so expressed, to find appropriate objects for them, and to correlate those objects into a coherent system of social aims. This, in brief, is the problem of social teleology. No one has yet fully stated the problems to be solved in this division of social inquiry. They are the key to all constructive thinking about human improvement. There can be no very stable theories of social action until there are convincing standards of social aim.

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. The progressive era was one in which *planning* was eagerly applauded. In contrast to *laissez-faire* approaches which counseled letting things take their natural course, progressives advocated taking active steps to reform social problems and to advance social progress. What is the role of sociology to this enterprise, according to Small? How does this compare to Durkheim's version of sociology (published at the same time)?
2. Small asserts that the "individual" is but an abstract concept, and does not exist in reality) what does he mean? Does this sound familiar to you? Have you heard something similar from another theorist we've read this term?
3. It is often said that American sociology is *pragmatic* or geared toward practical ends. How can theory be pragmatic? Use Small to explain.