

THE CLASSICAL TRADITION IN SOCIOLOGY

THE AMERICAN TRADITION

VOLUME I

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General Introduction

The Paradoxical Relations of Self and Society in American Sociological Thought

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What are called new views . . . are not new, but the very oldest of thoughts cast into the mould of these new times. The light is always identical in its composition, but it falls on a great variety of objects . . . In like manner, thought only appears in the objects it classifies. (Emerson, 1842)

The American tradition of sociology can be understood as the “secularization” into scientific language of two utopian movements of social reform. Sectarian Protestantism and anti-authoritarian democracy sought to gain salvation by making practical utopias here on earth. For American sociology the ultimate goal can still be called social salvation. This is pursued, however, not by perfecting the soul or the polity but by reconstructing the civil society. Responding to the crises of industrialization and ethnic heterogeneity, the goal of American sociology has been, as Russell Dynes (1974) once put it, “to create a massive urban renewal project which would build the kingdom of man to replace the lost Kingdom of God.” The means for achieving this goal are neither faith nor virtue, but rational, scientific knowledge of society, whether defined in the positivist and quantitative or hermeneutic and qualitative sense.

These roots and ambitions distinguish the American sociological tradition from the European, despite their shared disciplinary matrices and continuous cross-Atlantic interpenetrations.¹ Developed in the context of church religion and collective projects for democratic revolution, European sociology emphasized state organization and the constraints imposed by actors’ external environments. By contrast, American ideology has focused, often myopically, on the individual self. What has marked American sociology is its preoccupation with the individual above all else, thus its extraordinary concern with the *motives* of individuals (“action” in sociological terms) and their mutual *relations*

("interaction"). Even when the focus of American sociology has shifted to *institutions*, its concern has been to understand how these collective forces provide either a supportive arena for the realization of individual interactions or block their realization.

European sociology has viewed society as external and dominating, whether in the reformist terms of Durkheim, the radicalism of Marx, or the agnosticism of Weber and Simmel. The perspective of American sociology, even when it is highly critical, has been quite the opposite. The emphasis in studying ordered patterns and structures has been on how they structure individual motivations and on how these "social selves," as Cooley called them, actively orient to patterns and structures in turn. Interactions are viewed less as the deposits of social structure than as patterns emergent from actors' intentions. Institutions, in turn, are linked in a very pronounced way to the interactions of individuals and the groups they form.

The specificity of the American approach to the central topics of sociology can be seen in this comparative light. *Social movements* are viewed, not as systematically generated confrontations or adaptations, but more as communicatively generated and cooperative group activities. *Organizations* are seen less as inherently constraining hierarchies than as networks of collective purpose which may become objectified through individual inattention and conflicting practical goals. *Economic sociology* focuses, not on abstract market requirements, but on commitments between local actors. *Political sociology* is less concerned with class linkages and party oligarchies than with plurality, voter choices, and interest coalitions. *Stratification studies* reveal less about the macrostructuring of unequal opportunities than the opportunities for mobility provided by individual achievement. *Social systems theory*, rather than seeing systems as autonomous and self-referential, examines how systems facilitate voluntarism. *Cultural sociology* focuses on interpretations and social movements, on beliefs rather than on ideologies promoted by elites. Decidedly optimistic, American *postmodernism* proclaims, not the alienating separation of society from individuals, but the liberating connections made possible by recent transformations in gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality.

All this does not mean that American sociology is oblivious to power and domination or that it lacks a critical tradition. It means, rather, that conflict is often viewed as another form of emancipation, and that instrumental motives and coercive actions are studied as patterned departures, as deviations from the more communicative and cooperative norm. Conflicts are understood as being generated by cynical motives more than by normalizing social structures, by social relationships that have gone awry, and by institutions and organizations from which human attention and purpose have slipped away. If American sociology is the home of voluntaristic systems theory and interactionally-rooted microsociology, its critical macrosociology is triggered by outrage at the failure to sustain connections between interactions and institutions, a breakdown created by the failure of political virtue and the decline of idealistic faith.

The origins of this deeply paradoxical understanding of the fate of the "self" in modern society can be traced back to fundamental dualities in the culture of American civil society. In American ideology, the relation of actors to civil society has been problematized precisely in terms of the motives of individuals, their interrelations, and the institutions these form.² An optimistic "discourse of liberty" demarcates the qualities that legitimate inclusion and participation. In terms of their motives, civil actors are idealized as independent, honest, self-controlled; their relations are held to be cooperative and trusting; their institutions are described as responsive, open, and egalitarian. In tension with this idealizing discourse, Americans also have imagined motives, relations, and institutions in a starkly contrasting manner, employing an ideological language that has justified excluding individuals and groups from civil society. According to this anti-democratic "discourse of repression," actors are dependent, deceptive, and impulsive; they enter into relations that are aggressive, distrustful, and conflictual; they form institutions that are unresponsive, closed, and hierarchical.

Insofar as American sociology has secularized and scientized these broader cultural traditions, it is not surprising that sociological thinking has been bifurcated in a very similar way. In one line of sociological observation, the fundamental social processes of modernity – industrialization, plurality, secularization, science – are viewed optimistically. Thinkers explain how these processes emerge from and contribute to creative and cooperative social action, how they restructure but still complement group sentiment and cohesion, how they lead to increasingly open and democratic institutions. According to this sociological version of the discourse of liberty, which cuts across a wide range of empirical and theoretical variations, social scientific findings confirm the strength of modern civil societies.

It is precisely the solidary sentiments underlying this stability that are questioned by the alternative, and typically subordinated, line of sociological thinking informed by the discourse of repression. Modernizing processes are understood as threatening the requirements of civil society, as making actors less, not more fit for the challenge of democratic participation and fraternal support. Industrialization, now understood as capitalism, turns potentially trusting humans into things, making motivation calculating, devious, instrumental. Secularization and plurality are found to create antagonistic social relations in which trust has dissolved. Science has led not to greater clarity and truthfulness but to obfuscation and objectification. Bureaucracy and other hierarchical systems permeate modern societies precisely because only these kinds of institutions can order such dangerously centrifugal force.

While sharply contrasting in ideal-typical terms, in terms of the actual patterns and dynamics of American social thought, these theoretical visions have been empirically intertwined. Consider, for example, the founding documents of American civil society itself, *The Declaration of Independence* (1776) and the *Constitution* (1789). Reflecting Locke's optimism about rationality and cooperative human nature, Thomas Jefferson's radically democratic *Declaration*

is a humanistic appeal for individual freedom against collective force. Assuming actors' inherent common sense and good will – the existence of “native justice and magnanimity” – Jefferson suggests that actors are guided by self-generating norms, by ideals that reflect the “inherent rights of individuals.”³ It is this optimism about the reasonableness of actors that justifies direct, democratic self-government, which is instituted only “to secure these rights” of a “free people.” Indeed, it is because people are basically cooperative and rational that repressive and authoritarian institutions not only are unnecessary, but often pernicious. Good government can be based only on the “consent” of the individuals who created it. Bad government is authority that disregards voluntary compliance. In response to this disregard, rational individuals will exercise their natural rights, presenting “self-evident truths” to a “candid world.” By making such public “petition,” political actors will be demonstrating “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind.” Right motives and communicative action are at the heart of political conflict. Legitimation depends on “the rectitude of . . . intentions,” not on the power of resources.

In sharp contrast, it is Hobbes, rather than Locke, that informs James Madison's defense of the American constitution in his famous contributions (numbers 10 and 51) to the *Federalist Papers*. Madison writes as a self-confessed realist, asserting that, “if men were angels, no government would be necessary.” Pointing to a “deficit of better motives” – to a motivational structure that threatens the very existence of liberty – he warns about “zeal,” “ambition,” and, above all, the “common impulse of passion.” These motives, Madison warns, tend to undermine cooperative social relations, creating “mutual animosity” and the “violence of faction.” Left to their own devices, as they are in a participatory democracy, such motives and relations create the “instability, injustice, and confusion” that facilitate institutions of domination, for in these kinds of situations actors are “more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good.” In order to protect liberty, therefore, “neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on,” and spontaneous “communication” will only make things worse. Only carefully constructed “powers of government” can control these “dangerous” tendencies. These powers can be found only in the Republican form of government. The indirect representative character of Republican, as compared to direct democracy, allows “the government to control the governed”; the division of powers in Republicanism, moreover, guarantees that there will be “no communication whatever” between plural institutions and contending interest groups.

If Madison's classical formulation of democratic theory adumbrated what later came to be called (Coser 1956) the conflict tradition in American sociology, the writings of the American Transcendentalists, appearing fifty years later, presaged the more optimistic Chicago school of sociology inspired by Pragmatism. In his philosophical transformation of the discourse of liberty, Ralph Waldo Emerson criticized as “materialist” precisely the kind of pessimism about the self and emphasis on restrictive social institutions manifest in

Madison's founding treatise. "The materialist insists on facts, on history, on the force of circumstances, and the animal wants of man," Emerson wrote in 1842. "The idealist," by contrast, insists on "the power of Thought and of Will, on inspiration, [and] on individual culture." Demanding that the individual be more positively evaluated, Emerson firmly places himself, and what he regards as by far the most valuable strand in American thought, in the idealist camp. In praise of subjectivity, he points to the social significance of ideas and motives, and establishes what will eventually come to be regarded as a specifically American social-cum-individual conception of the "me."

You think me the child of my circumstances: I make my circumstance.
 Let any thought of mine be different from that they are, the difference
 will transform my condition and economy. I – this thought which is
 called I – is the mould into which the world is poured like melted wax.
 The mould is invisible, but the world betrays the shape of the mould.
 You call it the power of circumstance, but it is the power of me.

A century after Emerson wrote these words, and in implicit reference to them, John Dewey, in his famous eulogy to George Herbert Mead, suggested that "the emphasis of the Romantic philosophers upon individual consciousness makes explicit the earlier religious idea that nature is but a theatre in which is enacted the drama of the human soul" (1936). In so doing, Dewey connected the philosophical foundations of the Chicago school of sociology to Transcendentalism and to the radical Protestantism which inspired it. Before considering this link, however, we must take up the actual origins of American sociology itself.

European sociology first developed in reaction to the French Revolution, and the first sociology of America, written by the Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, considers American social structure and culture in light of this world-historical event. It was the industrial revolution, however, that gave birth to the first American sociology. Like Herbert Spencer, the British sociologist who served as their role model, William Graham Sumner and Lester Ward, the founding figures of the American discipline, wrote in the shadow of the positivist social philosopher Auguste Comte, who gave to sociology its name. Yet the substantive ideas of these Americans were much more deeply influenced, as indeed were Spencer's, by the social facts of the industrial revolution and by the intellectual traditions of political economy and Darwinism. Defiantly "realistic" in the tradition of Madison, Sumner and Ward understood sociology as the definitive rejoinder to idealism in its religious and secular form, displacing ideas of good will, cooperation, reciprocity, and normatively regulated mutual interpretation with hard-edged, materialistic, and scientific conceptions of social force.

While disagreeing profoundly in their ideological reactions to the laissez-faire market economy, both American thinkers agreed that idealism had been

destroyed by industrial capitalism. The solidarity underlying civil society had disappeared, the economic and demographic were triumphant. Nature, not other individuals and groups, was the determining environment of human action. Describing the subordination of human subjectivity to natural force, Sumner insisted (quotes in Rossides 1978: 193-211) that there is "no disposition at all in nature to conform her operations to man's standards." Human motives, in his view, were far from the civil and cooperative ones that idealists believe. Defining these as "hunger, sex passion, vanity, and fear," Sumner argued that "under each of these motives are interests," and concluded that "life consists in satisfying interests." The method of sociology should mirror the naturalism and objectivism of its subject matter; only the completely dispassionate, scientific approach of this new discipline could provide insight into the objective and dominating powers that now controlled human life. "Social phenomena are subject to law," Sumner wrote, and "the natural laws of the social order are in their entire character like the laws of physics." In his causal theory, Sumner singled out such factors as population-land ratios and capital formation, deriding the voluntarism and idealism of American ideology in its Jeffersonian form.

The dogmatic or philosophical theorems, instead of being the cause of our social arrangements, are only the metaphysical dress which we have amused ourselves by imagining upon them. We are not free and equal because Jefferson put it into the Declaration of Independence that we are born so; but Jefferson could put it into the Declaration of Independence that all men are born free and equal because the economic relations existing in America made the members of society to all intents and purposes free and equal.

Cultural ideals, identified by Sumner as "folkways" and "mores," could be studied only as reflections of material structures; norms represent an "adaptation of means to ends."

While the other American sociological pioneer, Lester Ward, was much more critical of industrial capitalism than Sumner, his theoretical framework did not differ in fundamental ways. He described the natural universe as ruled by the principle of "collision" (quotes in Rossides 1978: 212-230), and he defined basic human motives as hunger and sex. While acknowledging that cognition and intention were basic human faculties, and that in the future a more egalitarian and responsive social order would be possible, Ward argued that the subordination of intelligence to animalistic sentiment had created a human history marked by "dark deeds and sinister practices." Deception has been the rule, and social institutions, from economy and politics to religion, had a fundamentally exploitative character. Ward believed that conflict was the master principle defining social life, declaring that humanity's "whole career has been marked by belligerency, internecine strife, and universal rapacity."

The creation of Pragmatic social theory in the turn of the century period, by Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, William James, and George Herbert Mead, provided a philosophical basis for renewing the more optimistic discourse of liberty in American sociology. Because of its emphasis on practical experience and problem-solving, Pragmatism has often been crudely caricatured as anti-idealistic, even materialistic. What really distinguished this quintessentially American approach, however, was its insistence that human experience is mediated by intention and language, that individuals engage in action, rather than mere adaptation, and that this action is directed by a reflexive and intelligent mind. While practical experience triggers action, action itself is subjectively motivated, rooted in interactions with others, and mediated by the continuously emergent and evolving self. Mead rejected the American psychologist Watson's stimulus-response approach, which led, not to action theory, but to a "behaviorism" in line with the pessimistic tradition of American thought. In creating his alternative, "*social behaviorism*," Mead developed the outlines of a sociological theory that emphasized the centrality of the self, its embeddedness in language, and its creativity in response to new situations and tasks. In contrast with the deterministic naturalism of Sumner and Ward, Mead stressed, as Dewey suggests in his above noted eulogy, the "*active connection between individual organisms and the world*," the "*part of nature that has become conscious*, and the "*unremitting occurrence of individuality, novelty and the unpredictable*" (*italics added*). The link between the contingency of the developing self and established moral tradition can be found in communication, which must be considered at once as structure (the grounding of contingency in normative control) and as process (the continuous adjustment of self and society to one another).

In the hands of Mead and the sociological generation he critically influenced, then, Pragmatism can be understood as an interactionally generated theory of communication. *Motivated* by the need for reciprocal communication, actors are seen as trusting, truthful, and open in their displays of self. The social *relations* that ensue between such actors are communicative as well, displaying cooperation, mutual adaptation, and exchange. Surrounding and supporting these motives and relations, it is believed, are such communicative *institutions* as the public sphere, mass media, interactional groups, and social movements.

None of Mead's early sociological followers articulated this Pragmatic vision more profoundly than Charles Horton Cooley.⁴ Cooley asserted that "where there is no communication there can be no nomenclature and no developed thought," concluding that an egoistic, instrumental approach to the individual was inconceivable: "What we call 'me,' 'mine,' or 'myself' is, then, not something separate from the general life, but the most interesting part of it, a part whose interest arises from the fact that it is both general and individual." The very idea of the "*social self*," in other words, is "drawn from the communicative life": "That the 'I' of common speech has a meaning which includes

some sort of reference to other persons is involved in the fact that the word and the ideas it stands for are phenomena of language and the communicative life." Cooley acknowledged that passion is a central human motivation, but, in sharp contrast with Sumner and Ward, he insisted that "passions are socialized by sympathy." Sympathetic motivations lead actors to be centrally concerned with the reactions of others: "The individual will be ambitious, but the chief object of his ambition will be some desired place in the thought of the others." For this reason, actions can be seen as "performances," as symbolic actions aimed at winning the sympathy of an audience. Self-interest and cooperation necessarily coincide, for, in order to gain the sympathy of others, actors must "feel allegiance to common standards of service and fair play."

With his conception of "primary groups," Cooley demonstrated how this communicative approach to motivation and interaction produced solidary bonds of "intimate association and cooperation." He emphasized the importance to society of groups like "the family, the play-group of children, and the neighborhood or community group of elders." Insisting that modernity does not inhibit such solidarizing processes, he called attention to the fact that "in our own society, being little bound by place, people easily form clubs, fraternal societies and the like, based on congeniality, which may give rise to real intimacy." Every "face-to-face" group inspires such mutual sympathy, even economic occupations, e.g., "workmen in the same trade." Viewed from the perspective of the sub-institutional solidarity generated by primary groups, Cooley believed, even the most devastating structural conditions of modern social life can be studied in a more optimistic, individually-affirmative way. "In our own cities the crowded tenements and the general economic and social confusion have sorely wounded the family and the neighborhood, but it is remarkable, in view of these conditions, what vitality they show; and there is nothing upon which the conscience of the time is more determined than upon restoring them to health."

In suggesting the continuing vitality of primary groups despite the urban devastation of his time, Cooley advanced the claim that these "groups . . . are springs of life, not only for the individual but for social institutions." This claim undergirds the research program initiated by such pioneers of Chicago sociology as Robert Park, E. W. Burgess, Louis Wirth, and Willard Waller. This closely connected intergenerational team of researchers and students studied how sympathy and cooperation, and the solidarity they generated, were channelled by the structures and processes of early twentieth century urban life, particularly its ethnic and economic divisions. They described the modern city not as a zone of economic exchange but as an impersonal web of human associations, one which encouraged a dense undergrowth of competitive and accommodative ethnic groups that eventually were assimilated into larger wholes. They studied industrial occupations as arenas for the display of individual learning and identity formation. They approached large, impersonal organizations by constructing their "natural histories." They studied social

conflicts as social movements, as clashes between communicatively generated solidarities struggling for moral recognition in the public sphere.

While generally confident about individual and group capacities for social renewal, these early Pragmatic sociologists were also aware that, under the impact of industrialization and mass immigration, the communicative motives and cooperative relations so necessary for civil society could go awry and civil solidarity depleted as a result. Socialist critics like Dewey and Walter Lippman warned that laissez-faire capitalism distorted communicative interaction and solidarity and threatened to put machine-like obedience and domination in their place. Cooley speculated about atomizing and egoistic consequences if the processes threatening primary group adhesion got the upper hand. Robert and Helen Lynd worried about this deterioration in their empirical examinations of "Middletown." In his acerbic observations on the social processes of industrial capitalism, Thorstein Veblen gave up entirely on the optimistic discourse of liberty, suggesting that technological growth had instrumentalized work and that "conspicuous consumption" rested upon animalistic hedonism and egotistical greed.

In decline by the 1930s, the Chicago school of sociology, which had dominated American theory and research from the turn of the century period, was challenged by the emergence of "functionalism," a much more collectively oriented sociological approach formulated by Talcott Parsons. This fiercely contested transition has been subjected to extraordinary misunderstandings. The first is that the sociology of the Chicago school, no longer hegemonic, simply disappeared. In fact, in tense and polemical relationship to the functionalist tradition centered in Harvard and Columbia, Pragmatic sociology continued to develop and evolve in significant ways. The second, much more fundamental misconception is that functionalism itself represented a drastic departure from the American sociological tradition. This second distortion can be traced in the first instance to the polemical manner in which Parsons positioned himself. Despite his familiarity with the "native" American tradition, for personal, institutional, and genuinely theoretical reasons Parsons identified his ideas not with American but with European social thought. In his paradigm-creating *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Parsons developed a neo-Kantian perspective, dismissing earlier American sociology as thoroughly individualistic and utilitarian in its explanatory scheme and as anti-philosophical and empiricist in its theoretical outlook. He claimed that only upon the European theories of Durkheim and Weber could American sociologists begin to accomplish important work. Needless to say, this "anti-American" orientation called forth indignant and polemical responses from the Chicago sociological school, which had been built upon a philosophical tradition, Pragmatism, that had defined itself in decisive opposition to "European" thought.

More than half a century removed from these polemical misunderstandings, Parsons' brief on behalf of European thinkers can be seen as much as an effort to coopt them as a capitulation to them. What Parsons actually seems to have

done is translate their ideas into the idioms of the optimistic line of American thought, which can be understood philosophically just as much in a neo-Kantian as a Pragmatic way. Parsons' functionalism created, in other words, a new, more macrosociological version of the discourse of liberty. Against Durkheim's apparent reification of society and his demands for conformity to the invariant laws of social life, Parsons brought Durkheim's ideas of solidarity and symbolism into the service of his own self-proclaimed "voluntaristic" theory of action. Against Weber's pessimistic political sociology of rationalization, strategic action, group conflict, and domination, Parsons employed key concepts from Weber's own religious sociology to construct an ethically oriented model of modernity that centered on normative action, moral institutions, and the vitality of self-regulating professional groups. It is true that, under the influence of Kant and Dilthey, Parsons insisted on the reality of collective moral values, describing them as "transcendental ends" regulating individual actions. Influenced by the radical Protestant and democratic traditions, however, Parsons also insisted that individuals achieved freedom and autonomy *vis-à-vis* worldly institutions *precisely because of* their attachment to such values.

It was precisely this orientation to the macrosociological foundations of the discourse of liberty – and not some organicist, conservative bias, as their critics often claimed – that provided the empirical topics for generations of functionalists, from Kingsley Davis, Robin Williams, Bernard Barber, and Robert Merton to Robert Bales, Neil Smelser, Robert Bellah, and Leon Mayhew. Thus, in marked contrast with other macrosociological traditions, they persisted in studying socialization, examining the empirical processes by which individual autonomy is achieved via the internalization of values. Studying such agents of socialization as families and peer groups, they insisted that these primary groups were complementary to such formal institutions as schools and even economic organizations. When functionalists explored the "pattern variables" of culture in every group and institution, they were in search, not of conformity, but of the resources for individuation, autonomy, cooperation, and even emancipation. Deviance emerged when institutional strains severed the connections between individual motives and the values shared by other actors. Intensive social divisions emerged from conflicts between collective values themselves. Social movements were adaptive responses to these fissures, problem-solving developments that produced institutional change and value renewal in an often progressive way.

As the functionalist version of American sociology came into prominence in the 1940s and 1950s, sociologists in the Chicago tradition began to articulate their own approach to the American theoretical tradition in more one-sided, often polemical ways. Against what they conceived to be the mechanistic, collectivist, and anti-individual tendencies of functionalism, the second and third generations of the Chicago school emphasized contingency, self reference, and direct face-to-face interaction *over and against* the influence of more structured cultural patterns, group solidarity, and institutional forms. Even while deepening

and elaborating many early Chicago school ideas and themes, these studies narrowed and simplified the scope of Pragmatic sociology in far reaching ways. What emerged between the Pragmatic and functionalist versions of the discourse of liberty was a "dialogue of the deaf," one manifestation of which was the yawning micro-macro split that has continued to bedevil American and, indeed, European sociology until this day. Herbert Blumer, Mead's most influential disciple, made a series of original contributions to conceptualizing the role that individuals play in the construction of social movements and racial solidarities. The impact of these studies was reduced, however, by Blumer's highly polemical claims that collective values are sociologically irrelevant and that the meaning of an individual action is solely determined by another actor's response to it. By so reducing sociology to an exclusive focus on interaction, Blumer truncated the communicative theory of earlier Pragmatic sociology, in effect separating (contra-Wittgenstein) language as a cultural system from language in use.

Even the most distinguished contributions to "symbolic interactionism," the name Blumer gave the Meadian tradition in 1937, suffered from similar limitations. Everett Hughes developed a rich ethnographic approach to work and occupations, but he said precious little about their surrounding cultural and structural environments. While Howard Becker elaborated an original approach to deviance as a "career," describing it as an affirmative and solidaristic response to negative interactional sanctions, he did not explore the institutional strains that produced such sanctions or the consequences for social movements and social change that deviant careers might induce. With his genius for combining close empirical observation with conceptual innovation, Erving Goffman virtually created the contemporary field of "microsociology"; indeed, he and Parsons represent the most original and important American sociological thinkers in the last half century. Yet Goffman's "dramaturgical sociology" was resolute in its insistence that the selves of actors are completely *sui generis*. In constructing their performances, Goffman's actors pay only lip service to collective values, making strategic and cynical avowals of public fealty in order to gain control over the actions of others.⁵ Despite his links with European phenomenology, Harold Garfinkel's "ethnomethodology" can also be seen as a highly original, and highly polemical, continuation of the Pragmatic version of American sociological thought. In the empirical studies produced by Garfinkel and his students, communication is studied not as the expression of sincerely shared values, much less as a trusting effort to gain cooperation; rather, communication is a post-hoc "account" which aims at achieving the veneer of consensus despite practical conflict.

Goffman's profoundly cynical approach to society seems to imply a hard-headed, realistic, and externalist approach that departs from the optimistic presuppositions of the discourse of liberty. Indeed, the exaggerated focus on self-oriented individuals and strategic interaction in the writings of the postwar Chicago school had the paradoxical effect of encouraging an instrumentalist

sociology in the Madisonian tradition. In founding "exchange theory," for example, George Homans returned to the laissez-faire liberalism of American sociology's founding figures and to the Watsonian behaviorism that Mead had struggled against. Virtue and normativity were absent from Homansian sociology, which conceived actors as isolated atoms and modelled interaction as an egoistic exchange of positive and negative sanctions. Moving away from Homans' exclusive emphasis on subinstitutional processes, Peter Blau and James Coleman built upon his instrumental, realist theory to create models of binding social structures and institutions.

In this vein of Madisonian realism, there developed, from the 1950s through the 1980s, a wide range of anti-functionalist versions of American sociology. Despite their great differences from one another, these theoretical and empirical studies shared the central proposition that, in modern, democratic, secular, and capitalist societies, actions and institutions can, and perhaps must, be constructed without reference to normativity and subjective good will, without what Locke called a natural identity of interests.

Certainly this was the fundamental claim of the non-Marxist "critical" tradition that emerged in the postwar period of American sociology. In tandem with David Riesman's pessimistic finding that modern individuals were no longer "inner-directed," William H. White discovered that the manipulation of mass values produced the conformity of the "organization man." Disputing Parsons' claim that internalized values allowed individuality, Dennis Wrong claimed, to the contrary, that they created "over-socialization" and repression. In his version of mass society theory, William Kornhauser found that pluralism and individuation smothered autonomy and reason. C. Wright Mills studied how the rise of a national and centralized "power elite" had followed from the destruction of small-town Jeffersonian democracy. Richard Sennett placed the "fall of public man" earlier, tracing it to the rise of capitalism and bureaucracy, as did Robert Bellah – with Amitai Etzioni one of the key figures in American communitarianism – who linked the rise of utilitarian individualism also to the decline of religious values.

While less radical and darkly pessimistic, anti-functionalist approaches to organizations were elaborated in a similarly "Madisonian" way.* When Seymour Martin Lipset, James Coleman, and Martin Trow made their pro-democracy arguments against the pessimistic predictions of the Italian sociologist Robert Michels, they suggested that the survival of trade union democracy depended, not on the significance of values or the creative actions of individuals, but on the pluralistic division of social resources. Philip Selznick suggested that, despite the sincerity of human purpose, organizations initially established to realize collective values tend to be "coopted" by their efforts to contain competing social actors; in this way, they become "deflected" from their original purpose, i.e., bureaucratized in the Weberian sense. Reacting against what they regarded as the naiveté of Parsons and even Selznick, "neo-institutionalists" like John Meyer and Paul Dimaggio later developed an even more "realistic"

approach to organizations. Building upon Goffman and Garfinkel, they denied the very possibility of cooperative and trusting relations between leaders and followers, declaring every expression of value commitment to be merely an effort at legitimation.

This Madisonian sociological discourse, which is inspired by the omnipresence of repression and domination, also informs the tradition of historical and comparative sociology that, in the 1960s and 1970s, emerged as an American "conflict sociology" in tandem with the recrudescence of European Marxism. Separating themselves from Durkheim and Parsons, and eliding Weber with Marx, such thinkers as Barrington Moore, Immanuel Wallerstein, Charles Tilly, Theda Skocpol, and Randall Collins separated action from subjectively experienced motives. Declaring that values exist only as legitimations for hegemonic institutions, they declared that macrosociology must focus on social structure, conflict, and hierarchy at the expense of action, culture, cooperation, or cross-group solidarity.

In response to these developments, sociological efforts to redeem the discourse of liberty emerged both from within the functionalist tradition and outside it. Distancing themselves from the unreflexive optimism of "American exceptionalism," and incorporating a more realistic understanding of economic and political power, neofunctionalism elaborated a normative vision of society in which individual motives, social groups, and institutions were linked by references to shared ideals. Inspired by the German neo-Kantian philosopher, Jürgen Habermas, who himself had been deeply influenced by Dewey and Mead, neofunctionalism related Parsonian ideas to the more communicative theories of early Pragmatism, acknowledging the importance of Madisonian pluralism but imbedding it in democratic public opinion, critical value commitments, and rational desires. While some of the principal proponents of the new American "sociology of emotions" have elaborated their subdiscipline in the strategic Madisonian vein, others (e.g., Jack Katz) emphasize the spontaneous authenticity of expressive behavior and the solidarities it produces. Similar divisions run through what has been called "the new American cultural sociology."⁶ One group of American cultural sociologists, maintaining continuity with the conflict and organizational traditions, analyzes cultural patterns in relation to economic and political constraints. In contrast with this "sociology of culture," there has emerged a "cultural *sociology*" that emphasizes the influence of historical traditions rather than purely objective conditions, views symbolic interactions as rituals and not only as conflicts over resources, and pays close attention to how cultural narratives emerge from individual efforts to establish identity. Similarly, while the "resource mobilization" approach to social movements connects closely with conflict theory and neo-institutionalism, the "framing" approach developed by David Snow and his colleagues takes off from the more voluntaristic, communicative, and value-oriented strains of early Pragmatism. While such relatively recent American developments as queer theory, race theory, and feminist sociology certainly display Marxist and

Foucaultian lineages, in the American context these “postmodern” sociologies also reveal a much more optimistic, democratic, and integrative slant.

There are remarkable continuities in the history of American sociological thought, patterns that are obscured by such (all too familiar) juxtapositions as “symbolic interactionism versus functionalism” or “conflict versus order theory.” From the historical founding documents of American civil society to contemporary “trends” in the sociological discipline that was established to protect it, one finds an obsessive concern with the vitality of individuals and their scope for free action. One strand of American sociology is relatively pessimistic. Convinced that the independence of the self has been undermined and the human spirit depleted, it has assumed strategic action and explored the threats to civil society that emanate from external, objective social structures. Another strand of American sociology has remained decidedly more optimistic, exploring the creation of individual subjectivity, communicative processes between individuals, and the patterned dynamics of powerful ideals. For this more optimistic and subjectively oriented tradition, the health of civil society rests on the continuing vitality of solidary ties.⁷ For the more pessimistic “realist” tradition, protecting civil society depends on preventing the centralization of power and resources. Undoubtedly, civil society depends on both subjective and objective resources. Just as civil society needs both the Jeffersonian and the Madisonian traditions, so does the health of sociology depend on the dialogue between the theoretical and empirical orientations that have translated these traditions in a social scientific way.

Notes

Thanks to Paul Colomy, Stephen Turner and Jack Katz for their assistance in outlining the historical documents of the American sociological tradition. Thanks to Benjamin Alaexander-Bloch for pointing out to me the conflict between Madisonian theory and Transcendentalism.

1. And despite the fact, which cannot too strongly be emphasized, of the manifold internal variations in each of these traditions. These are not only spatial – national and regional – but political, religious, and of course philosophic. Nonetheless, the premise of this essay is that, in terms of their classical and modern exemplars, the historical and geographical referents “European” and “American” can be productively employed to develop contrasting ideal types. As Weber emphasized, ideal types are selectively constructed, highlighting contrasts for specific and delimited heuristic purposes. This stricture raises two important considerations, one methodological, the other normative. First, the sociological traditions that have flourished in Europe and America, and in other regions of the globe, can be parsed in very different ways that can be equally productive for heuristic purposes that cut across national and regional considerations. Second, in presenting a geographically oriented reconstruction of sociology, I am making an empirical, not a normative claim; I am neither advocating community-oriented localism

versus supra-national cosmopolitanism in sociology, nor, much less, am I arguing for the superiority of one community's traditions over another's. To the contrary, ever more intensive and symmetrical communication between Europe and America, among the various Americas and Europes, and between the centers of sociology now proliferating throughout the world is a goal much to be desired. International references have been part of the development of local sociologies from the beginning of the discipline, and the intensity of contemporary "globalization" will continue to counterbalance the regional and civilizational myopias of various sociological traditions.

2. See Jeffrey C. Alexander and Philip Smith, "The Discourse of American Civil Society: A New Proposal for Cultural Studies." *Theory and Society* 22 (2): 1993: 151-207.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, quotations in this essay are drawn from the documents anthologized below. In order to facilitate my editorial narrative, I sometimes refer to the original dates of publication; all other bibliographical information is available in the texts themselves.

4. Quotes are from Cooley's "The Self as Sentiment and Reflection" (in Cahill 1994 [1906]: 16-20) and from his "Primary Groups," in Cooley, *Social Organization* (1909): 23-31.

5. It should be noted, perhaps, that Goffman's emphasis on the separateness and strategizing quality of individuals does not mean that he embraced Blumer's anti-collectivism in every respect. To the contrary, Goffman often juxtaposed the amoral individual with a moralistic and highly constraining social order.

6. Philip Smith, ed., *The New American Cultural Sociology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

7. In his recent, avowedly empirical stock-taking of the field, "The Elusive Situation in Social Psychology," Melvin Seeman revealed the moral ambition of sociological work in a manner that demonstrates the extraordinary continuity of the "optimistic tradition" over the course of this century.

I take my text from the men whose work is truly being honored here: Charles Horton Cooley and George Herbert Mead. For both, the social context of experience – the social situation – served as the basis for the development of the self, *rational* action, and *cohesive* social institutions. These views are expressed in their conviction that *society and the person are complementary*; the social situation is the crucible of interaction in which *reflexive self-consciousness* and *community membership* develop. (*Social Psychology Quarterly* 1997 60 [1]: 4-13, quoting from p. 4, italics added).

In this empirical assessment of a major subdiscipline of contemporary American sociology, we find not only the social scientific translation of the three levels of the discourse of liberty (self, interaction, and institution) but the presuppositions that these levels can be defined and interrelated in a spontaneous, rational, cooperative, and democratic way.

Introduction to the Major Sections

Jeffrey C. Alexander

The Emergence of American Sociology: From the Enlightenment to the Founding Fathers

With less ambivalence than in Europe, sociology in America sprouted directly from the Enlightenment faith that applying scientific reason creates social progress. This belief in a “social” science marked the writings of both Sumner and Ward, which are permeated by naturalism and materialism and leavened with Darwin’s emphasis on conflict and evolution; these framing ideas also deeply affected Dubois’s pioneering empirical investigations into race. American sociology’s eager embrace of quantitative methods was another manifestation of this direct application to sociology of Enlightenment methods and ideals.

Yet it is also important to see that this Enlightenment consensus was marked by theoretical and moral conflict. One strand of American social thought, quintessentially captured by Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence*, was optimistic about the capacity of individual reason to structure human relations and institutions in a cooperative and trusting way. By contrast, the strand of American Enlightenment thought more deeply affected by classical Republicanism evinced more pessimism about reason’s triumph, was more inclined to envision unruly conflict, and more sympathetic toward the restrictions imposed by institutions. Madison’s contributions to *The Federalist Papers*, the early defense of the American Constitution, crystallized this second strand of American Enlightenment thinking in a fundamental way.

While not an American himself, Tocqueville presented the optimistic confidence in individuality and cooperation in the first volume of *Democracy in America* and the more pessimistic emphasis on conformity and institutional domination in the second volume of that great early work. The major philosophical innovation of this early period, Transcendentalism, articulated the idealism of the Jeffersonian tradition in a manner that was, eventually, to have

fundamental repercussions on American sociology. In opposition to this tradition, Sumner and Ward articulated a more materialistic and conflict-oriented approach that was to have far-reaching implications as well.

The Emergence of American Sociology: The Classical Tradition

The origins of what has become known as the most quintessentially "American" form of sociology can be traced to the Pragmatist revolution in philosophy. Against the materialism, pessimism, and scientism of its day, Pragmatism took up the more optimistic, interpretive, and morally-oriented vision earlier proclaimed by Emerson and Thoreau. With such concepts as the generalized other, the I and me, and the significance of gestural communication, Mead translated Pragmatic insights into the framework for sociological theory and research. In Cooley's hands, this general orientation became the basis for a program that focused on the interactional and collective features of social communication: action as dramatic performance, face-to-face interaction, and primary group solidarity. While the "Chicago school" has retrospectively been labelled micro-sociological, the institutional focus of such figures as Park and Wirth belie this narrow focus. What can be said is that the manner in which they approached such institutional phenomena as publics, social movements, and urban social relations reflected their deep concern for individual action and reciprocity, for the social significance of mutual understanding and the social centrality of communication. Similar concerns also informed work outside of the Chicago school, as in the critical perspective on contemporary economic life developed by Veblen and the Lynds.

American Sociology in the Twentieth-Century: From Pragmatism to Functionalism and Quantitative Sociology

During this period the patterns of "modern" American sociology were laid down, establishing the now familiar disciplinary features that were globalized in the postwar period of American sociological expansion.

Central to the formation of this mid-twentieth century discipline was the polarizing confrontation between the emergent, Parsonian functionalism and the version of Pragmatist sociology called symbolic interactionism. In the late 1930s, with the influence of the first Chicago school on the wane, Parsons published a powerful theoretical and programmatic text, *The Structure of Social Action*, which criticized traditional American sociology as individualistic and empiricist and called for a more collective, culturally oriented approach based on theoretical foundations established by Durkheim and Weber, both Europeans. The second generation of the Chicago school, led by Herbert Blumer, denounced this functionalist program as authoritarian, idealist, and empirically irrelevant, initiating a program that focused much more emphatically on face-to-face interactions and local situations than the earlier and broader forms of Pragmatic sociology.

Thus was born the famous split between “macro” and “micro.” While certainly an important theoretical topic in its own right, the American form of this confrontation has obscured the fact that functionalism and interactionism are both variations on the optimistic strand of the American sociological tradition. In their approaches to action, both emphasize interpretation and emotion over strategy. In their studies of interaction, both examine trust and mutual understanding. In their conceptualization of institutions and societies, both emphasize solidarity, the public, and communication. It is not surprising, then, that both the functionalist and interactionist traditions developed research programs in the area of small groups.

American Sociology in the Twentieth-Century: Recent Trends in Sociological Theory

One of the paradoxical effects of the narrowing of the Pragmatist tradition was the stimulus it gave to the development of more individualistic and strategic approaches in American sociology. Within interactionism, one can see this development very clearly in the cynical approach to “performance” that inspired Goffman’s dramaturgical sociology. Despite its roots in phenomenology and hermeneutic theory, the same tendency increasingly came to dominate Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. Homans’ “exchange” theory, which inspired a wide range of rational choice approaches, is the clearest manifestation of this approach on the micro level. This same pessimistic Madisonianism, however, became even more strongly crystallized in American macro-sociology. Not only in the most influential comparative and historical work, but in organizational studies and “critical” sociology, there emerged an anti-interpretive, anti-cultural framework that paid much less attention to normative solidarity than to conflict over economic and political interest.

In late twentieth century American sociology, there have emerged different kinds of efforts to restore the Jeffersonian tradition. There has been an opening up of the Chicago tradition to more macro concerns, as displayed, for example, in studies of how social movements provide interpretive frames for social problems and in examinations of the “emotion work” upon which institutions depend. Similarly, a “neo” functionalism has broadened traditional Parsonian concerns, connecting it to interaction, interpretation, and communicative forms of solidarity. As Pragmatist inspired communitarianism re-emerged in American philosophy, it began to affect various sociological fields as well. Postmodern studies of gender, ethnicity, and sexuality have emphasized the democratic potentiality of these new forms of differentiating solidarities. The new American cultural sociology has focused on the meaning-making capacities of actors and groups, and the impact that interpretive frameworks have on broader institutions.