



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 22
Issue 3 September

Article 14

September 1995

**Review of *Classical Sociological Theory*. Jonathan H. Turner.
Reviewed by Valerie A. Haines, The University of Calgary.**

Valerie A. Haines
University of Calgary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Haines, Valerie A. (1995) "Review of *Classical Sociological Theory*. Jonathan H. Turner. Reviewed by Valerie A. Haines, The University of Calgary.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 3 , Article 14.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol22/iss3/14>

This Book Review is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.



**WESTERN
MICHIGAN**
UNIVERSITY

being placed with parents who were previously not candidates for adoption (foster parents, single persons, people with financial limitations, gays, individuals with health problems, etc.) with some degree of openness between all parties to the adoption. Modell contends that the move toward open adoption carries the potential of changing the foundation of American views of family, because of its dramatic departure from the accepted idea that biological, or *as-if* biological, ties are the truly critical components of family connectedness.

Who knows? Perhaps this society is moving toward Kahlil Gibran's admonition: "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you. And though they are with you yet they belong not to you". Now that, like open adoption, is a truly revolutionary conception of kinship.

Dorinda N. Noble
Louisiana State University

Jonathan Turner. *Classical Sociological Theory: A Positivist's Perspective*. Chicago, IL: Nelson Hall, 1993. \$ 18.95 papercover.

This collection brings together twelve essays on classical sociological theory that were published between 1975 and 1990 and three new essays that were written to fill in the gaps. The essays are unified by one of the leading themes of Turner's writings: the claim that sociology can be a natural science that develops universal laws. To move the study of classical sociological theory in this direction, Turner adopts a presentist strategy for reading Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Marx, Simmel, Weber, Pareto and Mead. Concerns for context, authorial intent and biography are abandoned in favor of first extracting essential theoretical ideas and then presenting them formally as abstract laws and dynamic analytical models that can be tested. By systematically following this theoretical strategy, Turner wants to demonstrate that his way of reading classical sociological theory can contribute to culmination of knowledge and ultimately "make books of classical theory unnecessary" (p. ix).

The first two essays return to Comte's call for a natural science of sociology and set out the "dos" and "don'ts" of reading classical sociological theory from this positivist perspective. The next five essays apply these rules to Spencer and Durkheim. The discussions of Spencer's law of evolution, militant-industrial distinction, principles of growth, differentiation and adaptation and their empirical base, *Descriptive Sociology*, are intended to counter persistent misunderstandings of Spencer's work and its relevance for contemporary sociology. Turner's 1981 attempt to extract from *The Division of Labor in Society*, *Suicide* and *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* Durkheim's principles of social system differentiation, integration and disintegration is followed by a more recent attempt to capture the essence of Durkheim's theory first as a complex causal model that converts all of its concepts into variables and then as a series of formal laws of structural differentiation, cultural differentiation, sociocultural diversity and sociocultural integration. The fifth essay in this set reassesses the Spencer-Durkheim relationship and concludes that while they converged in their thinking on the causes of differentiation, Spencer and Durkheim offered divergent specifications of the process of differentiation.

The five essays on the sociology of conflict focus on the works of Marx, Weber, Simmel, Parson and the exchange theorists. Expressing Marx's ideas about conflict first as a set of propositions and then as an analytical model allows Turner to explain "where Marx went wrong" in his predictions about the transition from capitalism to communism as a specification error: in Marx's theory, positive curvilinear relationships between key variables are misspecified as positive relationships. Turning to Weber, Turner constructs a model of delegitimation and conflict that highlights the importance of feedback loops and a model of geopolitics complete with causal arrows. Through these and other essays in this set, Turner illustrates how his theoretical strategy allows sociologists (1) to clarify the classical foundations of contemporary sociology (e.g., by reassessing the influence of Marx and Simmel on the sociology of conflict), (2) to extract abstract principles that are still useful (e.g., by stating formally those principles of social system differentiation, political mobilization, political oscillation and political conflict set out by Spencer, Durkheim, Marx, Weber,

Simmel and Pareto that are useful in political sociology) and (3) to synthesize ideas to produce more powerful theory (e.g., by combining ideas from Marx, Weber and exchange theory into an analytical model that yields laws of conflict potential, conflict and conflict violence).

This emphasis on cumulating knowledge also informs Turner's positivistic reframing of Mead's sociology. Written to redirect attention to Mead's behaviorism and structuralism, the first essay locates Mead in the development of arguments for a micro-macro link. The second essay Bets out the core ideas of Mead's "social physics" through a series of abstract universal laws of action, human action, interaction and organization. Like Comte, Spencer, Durkheim, Marx, Weber, Pareto and Simmel, then, Mead did develop abstract theoretical principles. But by taking the series of "detours from the early masters" that led them to ignore these theoretical principles, contemporary sociologists have failed to capitalize on the theoretical insights of classical sociological theory and, as a result, have failed to move sociology in the direction of a natural science that develops universal laws. For Turner the way around these detours is obvious: read classical sociological theory from a positivist perspective.

This collection covers much of the same ground as other studies of classical sociological theory. It is the way in which Turner approaches social theory and, therefore, his strategy for reading classical sociological theory that set it apart. As Turner acknowledges, both his positivism and his presentism are controversial. Readers who are familiar with the controversy about whether sociology can be a natural science will find in this book a clear statement of Turner's position and its implications for resolving the so-called historicist controversy. Those who are not familiar with these controversies will be unable to assess Turner's positivist perspective without reading this work against the backdrop of competing positions.

Valerie A. Haines
The University of Calgary