

Sociological Theories and the Changing Society

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Abstract

The point of departure for this paper is the location of sociological theorizing within certain socio-historical contexts which provoked the need for a systematic study and analysis of social phenomena. The paper also highlights the influence of natural science on sociological thoughts and the ensuing arguments about the applicability of natural science method in sociological inquiry. The paper, adopting Karl Popper's falsification approach, argues that sociological theories need to be continually subjected to test especially since human social world is constantly in a state of flux and also because social forces are not the exclusive preserve of classical age. It is hoped that this will eventually give Sociology and its theories the kind of reputation that natural science and its theories command.

1.1 Introduction

Sociology as a field of intellectual inquiry emerged in the nineteenth century against the background of the intellectual and material changes that occurred in the second half of the century (Onyeonuru, 1994). Just as natural science evolved within the natural environment and its subject matter is connected thereby, Sociology, crystallized amidst the chaos and social disorganization resulting from the twin-revolution that occurred in Europe. The immediate concern of early Sociologists, inter alia, included social engineering and reconstruction of the fabric of society almost torn apart by Industrial and French revolutions. In fact, Giddens (1981 cited in Jary and Jary, 2000) argued that Sociology's concern as a discipline is with the distinctive problems of modern industrial societies. The sweeping changes that Europe witnessed at the advent of the revolutions gave the impetus required for systematic study of society and its institutions. However, it is believed by some Sociologists that prior to these revolutions, classical philosophers such as Plato, Socrates, and even Scottish Enlightenment thinkers, Smith and Ferguson, had engaged in sociological thinking that laid the foundation upon which Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim and other classical social theorists built (Ogunbameru, 2008).

The challenge that early Sociologists had was how to legitimize their conception of society as an object of study, a system or structure objectively determined by laws and processes (Swingewood, 1991). Consequently, Sociology developed some of its earliest theoretical postulations using organismic and evolutionary explanations drawn from biological sciences. Functionalism and Social Darwinism are examples of sociological theories that drew from biological sciences to consolidate their intellectual footing. Functionalism, for example, traditionally rests on an organic conception of society—that is, on the belief that society is not merely a loose collection of individuals but a living organism comprising closely connected, interdependent members (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2012). On the other hand, Marxism, a leading sociological paradigm popularized by Karl Marx, originally combined history, philosophical view of man and an economic and political programme (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2012). The substance of early Marxism was that economic circumstances within which a people live determine the nature and direction of social change. It must be noted that these theories are grand theories – their emphasis is holistic, that is, on society and large human groupings rather than the constituent individuals. There are other perspectives that maintain ideological distance from holistic view of society. Symbolic interactionism, phenomenology and ethnomethodology focus on interpretation of actions and how the meanings individuals make from their regular and patterned interaction construct social life. The task of this paper therefore is to locate the social origin of these theories.

1.2 Conceptual Issues

1.2.1 Theory

Ekpenyong (2008) defined theory as “a set of interrelated generalizations which are combined in such a way that they explain why things happen, predict what is likely to happen under certain conditions and generalize beyond specific data at hand.” Theory is the outcome when the prediction that is inferred from a set of premises is confirmed to be true (Anikpo, 2006). Ekpenyong earlier cited identified three functions of a theory:

- (a) It explains observed events in a systematic manner.
- (b) It predicts the outcome of events and relationships.

(c) It systematically summarizes existing knowledge.

Finally, Jary and Jary (2000) defined theory as “any set of hypotheses and or propositions linked by logical or mathematical arguments, which is advanced to explain an area of empirical reality or type of phenomenon.” The kernel of theorizing is the explication of realities or phenomena in a coherent and systematic manner with a view to solving human, social problems or expanding the frontiers of already existing knowledge about phenomena.

1.2.2 Society

Society is one of the social science concepts subject to contestations by social science scholars. There are varied conceptualizations and definitions of the concept by scholars, a situation occasioned by their diverse scholarly interests. Jary and Jary (2000) argued that “society is usually fairly readily applied in the case of well-established nation-states, which have their own familial, economic and political institutions and clear borders.” But for most Sociologists, what is paramount is the network of relationships that exists among people living in group contexts (Brown, 1979). Therefore, society refers to totality of patterned and recurrent interactions existing among individuals in group setting. In conceptualizing society, emphasis is largely placed on human relationships woven into regular, predictable and self-perpetuating modes of interaction, and not necessarily the physical environment within which man exists.

1.2.3 Social Forces:

In the process of social relationship, there is usually tension that may threaten order, stability and social organization that allow societies to hold together and endure. Also, change is one indispensable reality of human world but it does not occur on its own; it must be engineered by a factor or a number of factors. These factors are forged from human, social relationships. Therefore, social forces will mean the realities that emerge out of the web of social interactions of individuals in any given human community, and which could alter an aspect of social organization or the social organization as a whole.

The focus of this paper is to examine the roles social forces played in the crystallization of sociological theories. This work hinges on George Ritzer and Jeffrey Stepnisky’s (2014) itemized social forces that necessitated the need for a science of society and sociological theorizing. They will be examined under the following headings:

- (a) Industrial Revolution and Rise of Capitalism;
- (b) French Revolution;
- (c) The Rise of Socialism;
- (d) Urbanization;
- (e) The Growth of Science and;
- (f) Religious Change.

1.3 Industrial Revolution and Rise of Capitalism

Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014) sees industrial revolution as many interrelated developments that culminated in the transformation of Western world from a largely agricultural to an overwhelmingly industrial system. Ritzer and Stepnisky’s conceptualization of industrial revolution raises a very important question which has evoked serious scholarly debates. The question is whether or not industrial revolution was a monolithic (cataclysmic) experience, as in the one dated from 1760, or (gradualist) consequence of complex of technological innovations that ensured the substitution of machines for human skills, inanimate power for human and animal force, and a shift from handicraft to manufacture; all of which give birth to modern economy (Landes, 1969, cited in Girigiri, 1999).

Nonetheless the differing views of scholars about how and when industrial revolution occurred, one commonality in their themes is that industrial revolution was a vehicle of social change from land-based economic production to factory-based manufacturing. Encyclopædia Britannica (2012) succinctly describes what transpired at the advent of industrial revolution thus:

The main features involved in the Industrial Revolution were technological, socioeconomic, and cultural. The technological changes included the following: (1) the use of new basic materials, chiefly iron and steel, (2) the use of new energy sources, including both fuels and motive power, such as coal, the steam engine, electricity, petroleum, and the internal-combustion engine, (3) the invention of new machines, such as the spinning jenny and the power loom that permitted increased production with a smaller expenditure of human energy, (4) a new

organization of work known as the factory system, which entailed increased division of labour and specialization of function, (5) important developments in transportation and communication, including the steam locomotive, steamship, automobile, airplane, telegraph, and radio, and (6) the increasing application of science to industry. These technological changes made possible a tremendously increased use of natural resources and the mass production of manufactured goods.

1.3.1 Causes and Consequences of Industrial Revolution

There are two perspectives that provide theoretical explanations as to what informed the industrial revolution: economic perspective and ecological perspective. The economic perspective was popularized by Sanderson (1999). His view was that industrial revolution was a brainchild of the burgeoning capitalist social relations in Europe. It was an inevitability considering capitalism's proclivity for profit maximization. Industrialization would serve tripartite purposes of increasing productivity, lowering costs and subtly alienating workers – surplus expropriation.

Ecological perspective, on the other hand, views industrial revolution as a necessity for addressing the problems posed by environmental circumscription. A leading proponent of this position, Wilkinson (1973, cited in Girigiri, 1999) argued thus:

The ecological background to the Industrial Revolution was an acute land shortage. In the centuries before industrialization, the English population was dependent on the land for all its material.

From the foregoing, it may be a herculean task to arrive at a single answer about the causative factor of industrial revolution, but what is not debated is the aftermath of the revolution. Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014) points to the fact that industrial revolution coincided with the emergence of class relations based on ownership and non-ownership of the means of production. In the emerging economic system, a few, powerful rich profited greatly while the vast majority worked long hours for low wages. This situation caused rapid social change and threatened the fabric of the society (Ekpenyong, 2003). The nascent economic system unavoidably forced women and children into industrial workforce – who lived in utter squalor compared to flourishing capital owners (O'Donnell, 1981). There was therefore a reactionary and radical movement spearheaded by labour movement to overthrow the capitalist system (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2014). The social problems that trailed the expanded profit-making of the ruling class and the impoverishment of the working class formed what the founding fathers of Sociology – Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Karl Marx and Max Weber – were responding to.

1.4 French Revolution and Sociology

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment positivism was essentially critical and revolutionary; its fundamental tenets of philosophical individualism and human reason largely directed against irrational powers of the absolutist state, organized religion and residual social institutions (Swingewood, 1991). The tyranny and corruption of the ruling aristocratic class in France had drawn the ire of the emerging bourgeois class and peasants - who were acutely aware of their situation and were less and less willing to support the anachronistic and burdensome feudal system (Encyclopædia Britannica, 2012).

The reactionary moves by the dissenting Frenchmen resulted into large-scale social disorganization and anomie which provoked the imperative of a study of society at a highly generalized and abstract level. Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014) submitted that the long series of political revolution in 1789 and carried over through the nineteenth century was the most immediate factor in the rise of sociological theorizing. So, the background to the origins of Sociology was the series of sweeping changes ushered in by the French Revolution (Giddens, 2006).

1.5 Rise of Socialism

Socialism is simply the antithesis of capitalism. It is a socio-economic ideology that contains values and policy prescriptions that pose a threat to the continuous existence of capitalism. The argument as to whether state socialism should replace capitalist mode of production has given birth to intense scholarly rivalry. Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014) notes that Karl Marx favoured the overthrow of capitalism, but Max Weber and Emile Durkheim were opposed to socialism (at least as it was envisioned by Marx). Ritzer and Stepnisky (2014) further posited that although Weber and Durkheim recognized the problems within capitalist society, they sought social reform within capitalism rather than the social revolution argued for by Marx. Typically, a chunk of sociological theories are reactions against Marxian thoughts. Consequently, many early social scientists rooted for capitalism; this they did by offering alternative positions – theories - differing from Marx's.

1.6 Urbanization

In classical times, rural-urban drift was largely a consequence of industrial capitalism (Sanderson, 1998). Industrial adventurism did not only affect the earlier feudal/monarchical social organization but succeeded in proletarianizing the hitherto existing peasant population. This resulted in the exodus of manpower from countryside to the cities where paid work could be found. The aftermath of extensive movement of rural-dwellers to emerging cities in search of wage labour was the beginning of urban decay occasioned by such problems as overcrowding, pollution, noise, and traffic congestion (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2014). This led to the emergence of sociological enterprise focused on theorizing urbanism and its effects on human social life. Leading among the theorists that attempted to explicate social realities within the broad spectrum of urban sociology were Robert Park, Louis Wirth, Ernest Burgess – all from University of Chicago – and George Simmel and Ferdinand Tonnies (of Frankfurt School).

The Chicago School developed two concepts: ecological approach and urbanism as a way of life (Giddens, 2006). Urban ecology, championed by Robert Park, adopted Charles Darwin's natural selection to explain how large urban areas developed by identifying **competition, invasion and succession**, as indices that determine patterns of location, movement and relocation in cities. On the other hand, Louis Wirth's thesis of **urbanism** as a way of life focused on the impersonality of relationships in modern cities and the loosening or weakening of emotional and traditional ties that held pre-industrial communities together. Similar to Wirth's analysis was George Simmel's concern for the tremendous impact urbanization exercises on the mental life of urban dwellers. For him, city life bombards the mind with images and impressions, sensations and activity and this deeply contrasts with the slower, more habitual, more smoothly flowing rhythm of the small town or village (Giddens, 2006). Ferdinand Tonnies' contribution to the study of modern cities was also among very influential sociological thoughts that followed structural changes witnessed by city centres as a result of industrial capitalism. His polar distinction of *Gemeinschaft* from *Gesellschaft* advanced the understanding of the phenomenon of urbanism greatly. He likened *Gemeinschaft* to a close-knit community based on traditional sentiments and *Gesellschaft* to that of an impersonal mass society where relationships are superficial, transitory and secondary (Schaefer, 2005).

1.7 Religious Change

Religion is a regulated pattern of life of a people in which experiences, beliefs and knowledge are reflected in man's conception of God in relation to others and his social world (Yinusa and Adeoye, 2005). Durkheim (1912, cited in Jary and Jary, 2000) viewed religion as 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things', things set apart and held in awe, which unites the believers into a moral community or church. It is deducible from the above definitions that religion exerts remarkable influence on man. Prior to scientific revolution, religion formed the basis for understanding and explaining physical and social phenomena. Things were believed to happen the way God willed them.

Noteworthy also is the fact that religion dominated early philosophy and vigorously strove to muzzle scientific endeavours. In the middle ages, for instance, explanations of physical and social phenomena were evaluated by comparing them with the teachings of ancient philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle (Ekpenyong, 2003). However, they were accepted as valid only if they did not contradict Christian teachings (Ekpenyong, 2003). Scholars such as Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes, against stiff opposition and violent harrying of scientific eclecticism, worked hard to standardize systematic methods for explicating realities. Their efforts heralded great advances in the physical and biological sciences in the eighteenth century. Soon, science became accepted as an alternative to religion, and it was this development that provided the springboard required for the emergence of science of society.

Hinkle and Hinkle (1954, cited in Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2014) have argued that early sociologists came from religious backgrounds and were actively, and in some cases professionally, involved in religion. They consequently infused their religious objectives into the 'embryonic' science of society (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2014). So, most of early sociological writings and theorizing had elements of morality. Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons, and even, Karl Marx – though with a far more critical orientation – had an interest in religiosity (Ritzer and Stepnisky, 2014). For instance, Weber in his widely acclaimed thesis, **Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism**, sought to explain the relationship between a religious belief (Protestantism) and capitalist expansion.

1.8 The Growth of Science

At the dawn of modernism, the influence that rationalism, metaphysics and religion exerted over the minds and behaviours of individuals had waned; science had thus become the acme of precision and the only reliable way

for acquiring knowledge. Resultantly, there was now general belief among individuals that science and its method afford the only reliable natural means of acquiring knowledge as may be available about whatever is real (John Wellmuth, cited in Anikpo, 2006). This threw up scholarly controversies among early Sociologists and this inadvertently helped to swell the fortunes of the emerging field of study.

1.9 Positivism versus Interpretivism

Positivism, as argued by Swingewood (1991), formed an integral part of the Enlightenment tradition: science and facts opposed metaphysics and speculation; faith and revelation were no longer acceptable as sources of knowledge. Sociological positivism dates from the early nineteenth century in the work of Auguste Comte – father of positivism. Comte had vigorously sought to advance the claim of Sociology to scientific status (Ekpenyong, 2003). Comte’s vision was a new science that would discover laws of human society resembling the laws of nature by applying the methods of factual investigation that had proved very successful in the physical sciences (Ogunbameru, 2008). His interest was that methods of natural science can be applied in the study of social phenomena. He started this foray by first launching damaging criticisms against metaphysical philosophy and standing on the side of David Hume’s empiricist philosophy (Swingewood, 1991). Eighteenth-century empiricist philosophy developed from the work of Francis Bacon, John Locke, Rene Descartes etc and its core is that the foundation of human knowledge is in experience and the basis of science is in experiment, induction and observation. Positivism established the external laws of historical change and defined society as an external datum, a structure of facts known and verified through observation and experiment (Swingewood, 1991).

Positivist tradition of applying of science and its method in social science and Sociology in particular has been challenged by the humanistic perspective. Humanistic perspective takes an ‘existential’ view of society, that is, society and its institutions should be analyzed in terms of the shared realities and actions of individuals as they understand them (Anikpo, 2006). This largely deviates from the positivist view of society as an ‘objective’ reality which can be studied through observable (sensory) evidence. Humanistic standpoint is that individuals are quite unlike matter that is passive and only responds to stimuli. For humanists, Sociology focuses on humans who have feelings, emotions and other subjective states which differentiate the subject matter of social science from that of the natural science (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Hence, their position is that if action originates from inner subjective state, the task of Sociology is to discover the meanings in order to understand the action rather than observe the action from outside and impose external logic upon it (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Immanuel Kant, Max Weber, George Herbert Mead and Edmund Husserl were among the earliest proponents of this persuasion.

2.0 Falsificationism, Sociological Theories and Contemporary Issues

Jary and Jary (2000) defined falsification as the “empirical disproof or refutation of a scientific hypothesis or proposed law. Karl Popper popularized this methodological position and it is concerned about how theories are formulated. For Popper, what makes a theory scientific is that its predictions are precise and confirmed by test (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). Popper suggests that scientists must vigorously test their theories and maintain objectivity. The crux of Popper’s falsificationism is that an inductive universal generalization can never be finally verified, given the ever-present possibility of new and potentially refuting evidence, a single non-supporting occurrence can refute a hypothesis (Jary and Jary, 2000). For him, “falsifiability” rather than “verifiability” is what makes a theory scientific or not. So, scientists must continuously try to falsify their theories, and the ability of the theories to stand the test of falsification is critical for ascertaining and concluding that they are scientific (Haralambos and Holborn, 2008). He argued that natural sciences have developed laboratory experiment to attempt the falsification of earlier postulated theories.

It is within Popper’s falsificationism that the central argument of this paper will be espoused. Earlier, attempt was made to conceptualize ‘theory’ vis-à-vis its origin and functions. The question then is, to what extent are sociological theories scientific? To a layman who lacks the understanding of the nuances involved in sociological studies, sociological theories may be considered unscientific, especially when compared with theories of physical and natural sciences. But, a critical examination of the evolution of natural science and its theories would reveal that laboratory experiments, just as argued by Popper, have helped to shape and standardize its theories. Therefore, the key to sharpening sociological theories is to keep attempting to falsify them, especially in the light of contemporary issues which were not aforethought by the founding fathers of Sociology. Clearly, social forces would not be limited to classical antiquities alone.

Conclusion

It is not arguable that sociological theories have been very useful and relevant in the explanation of social realities. The challenge for social theorists is to keep refining the existing theories so that the weaknesses and inadequacies inherent in them can be addressed. Already, the “neo-effect” – modification of classical sociological theories premised on refutations and criticisms – has helped to improve the quality of sociological discourse. Harmonization and triangulation of competing paradigms in Sociological theories will eventually lead Sociology to relative perfection which natural science enjoys.

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