



## Conference Proceedings

# SOCIOLOGICAL CLASSICS IN THE MODERN AGE

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### ABSTRACT

*We are witnessing the great changes of human society that took place throughout history. Sociology, as a scientific science, cannot be freed from the fact that all its knowledge is directly related to social changes and social conditions of cognition. The progress of knowledge in social science presupposes the progress of knowledge. It simultaneously reviews social changes and the fate of sociological ideas in the applied conditions of knowledge. In the overall structure of sociological knowledge, sociological theories are very important. The importance of sociological classics is also indicated by the fact that all major world powers have produced their 'representatives' and their theories in order to resist changes. Observing modern society, we're asking ourselves how and if we can adapt the classical sociological theories in modern society. Considering modern tendencies, in this work the authors will mention several classical sociological theories and emphasize their application in a far more developed society than when they were made, and if they are still applicable today.*

### KEYWORDS

*sociological classics, concept of trends, modern time, applicability of sociological classics*

## INTRODUCTION

In the overall structure of sociological knowledge, sociological theories are very important. Therefore, they are classified as a special subject of study and academic education. The scientific discipline deals with a more detailed and comprehensive interpretative review of ideas, authors and diverse knowledge that have classical importance (privileged status of classicism), not for rhetorical reasons, but precisely because the foundations of modern sociology as a science were laid on their account. That is the reason the followers attribute them the place that Plato and Aristotle occupy in political theory, or Shakespeare in English literature (Alexander, 1987).

We can consider the end of 19th and start of 20th century quite a turbulent time, or a time when society as the subject of research experienced big changes. Many famous sociologists had a great impact during those times, and the authors here will point out four most remarkable ones; Max Weber, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and George Simmel. All of them, each in their own time, devoted themselves to research of problems offering their deliberation. Each prominent sociologist in his own way tried to resist the time in which he found himself and to give birth to his answer to the time in which he found himself.

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# BASIC SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES

Georg Ritzer tells us that: 'Industrial revolution and capitalism, as well as the reactions to them, led to enormous upheavals in Western society that also greatly influenced sociologists themselves. Four most important people in the early history of sociological theory- Max Weber, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel- were preoccupied, like many other less important thinkers, with the changes and problems that industrialization and capitalism created in society.' (Ritzer 1997). The problems arising from the socio-political context were the basis of the research of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Georg Simmel. That is how Karl Marx tried to explain to us the nature of capitalist economies that were in the foreground in the 18th century Western Europe. It is safe to say that he was a revolutionist who aspired to overthrow capitalism. It all started with the industrial revolution that spread across Great Britain. Technological progress in communication, transportation and production led to the explosion of commercial commodity markets.

All these further led to the birth of modern capitalism. As the industry developed, agricultural labor declined, and families moved from rural areas to urban centers. The effects of industrial revolution were the most prominent in England. Due to the rapid growth of population, families had to live in poor housing conditions, which often resulted in the spread of disease. Engels described Manchester as 'Hell on Earth', as a way to emphasize poor living and working conditions (Chapter 2, Karl Marx). 'Wage workers, capitalists and land owners constitute the three great classes of modern society based on the capitalist mode of production.'

Thus, in capitalism there are 'only owners of labor, owners of capital and landowners whose respective sources of income are wages, profit and ground rent' (Marx 1867/1978). A very interesting statement by Marx is that when human actions are no different than machine actions, the individual is dehumanized. Even today, in the age of modern technology, the same can be concluded without any doubt. Karl Marx's views showed clear criticism of the capitalistic society, however, he did not fully develop the theory of socialism. Furthermore, Marx stated in one of his most famous passages that although 'men make their own history, they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past' (Marx 1852/1978).

Karl Marx was an active supporter of overthrowing the capitalistic system and its replacement with the socialist system. He was not a typical example of the early years of sociological theory. Thus, Ritzer states that many early theorists, such as Weber and Dürkheim, were the opponents of socialism (at least in the sense that Marx outlined it). Although they also recognized the problems of the capitalistic society, they strove for social reform within capitalism, not the social revolutions advocated by Marx (Ritzer 1997). It can be concluded that the sociological theory developed as a reaction against Marxist and general socialist theory.

On the other hand, Dürkheim is the most famous successor of the conservative tradition. He was afraid of social turmoils. He believed that social tensions are not a necessary element of the modern world and that they can be reduced by social reforms. While Marx understood problems of the modern world as socially inherent problems, Dürkheim (as well as Comte, Weber and others) does not share that opinion (Ritzer-Contemporary Sociological Theory, 16). With the development of theories, Dürkheim's theory became dominant, while Marx's theory remained on the sidelines for many years.

Like many others, Max Weber also had his interests, so he presented the theory of the process of rationalization. Weber's interest and the main question was why the institutions of the Western world were progressively becoming more and more rational, while strong barriers seemed to prevent a similar



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development in the rest of the world. Weber considered bureaucracy a classic example of rationalization. He incorporated his consideration of the process of bureaucratization into a broader discussion on political institutions. He also presented detailed and elegant analyses of the rationalization of the phenomena such as, for example, religion, law, city, and even music.

Later sociological theorists, predominantly conservative in their orientation, grouped themselves around theoretical alternatives to Marxism, and this is where Max Weber proved to be very interesting. The rationalization affected not only socialist but also capitalist societies. And indeed- from Weber's point of view, rationalization led to even greater problems for socialist than for capitalist societies (Ritzer-Contemporary Sociological Theory, 28). In conclusion, Weber offered a more complete approach to the social world, so his interest was a broad part of social phenomena. That diversity was later more acceptable for studies.

While studying the relevance of sociological classics, and at the same time trying to represent different geographical areas and periods, it is necessary to mention Georg Simmel. While Marx and Weber were ignored in the USA for a long time, Georg Simmel had an immediate effect on the development of American sociological theory. According to Ritzer, Weber and Marx were preoccupied with the macro aspects of the rationalization of society and the capitalist economy, whereas Simmel was best known for his work on micro sociological analyses, especially on individual actions and interactions. Simmel actually considered that understanding the interaction between people is one of the most important tasks of sociology. With its appealing title Simmel's Philosophy of Money attracted a large number of theorists interested in studying the culture and society.

Ritzer states that an important sociological development takes place when a group of two people (or dyad) transforms into a triad, that is, when a third person joins the dyad. Then new sociological possibilities that could not exist in a dyad open up. For example, in a triad, one of the members can become an arbiter or mediator in any differences between the other two persons. More importantly, two members can team up and dominate a third member. On a small scale, this represents the situation that can occur if the macrostructures of society become separated from individuals and begin to dominate them. The stated topic represents the core of the Philosophy of Money, and Simmel was preoccupied with the expansion of the global money economy which became dominant and separated from the individual.

From everything stated above, it can be concluded that there were many social powers or people who influenced the development of sociological theories, however, the author focused on a few of the most prominent ones. They showed the impact of political revolutions, the industrial revolution, the growth of capitalism, socialism, urbanization, religious changes as well as the rise of science on sociological theory. Another thing that is shown is the influence of intellectual powers on the growth of sociological theory in various countries, such as France, Germany, the Great Britain.

Therefore, classical sociological theories are truly classical, not only because they made a 'sociological revolution', but also because they constituted a field of thought which, no matter how supplemented, deconstructed or even prevailed over, represents the basis of today's scientific-sociological analysis of society (Kilminster, 1998, Martuccelli, 1999).

After an affirmative answer, it is desirable to support that answer with facts from the literature covered in this paper. As one of the most striking examples, we will list Georg Ritzer, who already in the introduction of his 'McDonaldization of society' states that the book deals with the criticism of society, according to which the theory of society serves its criticism, and therefore its improvement. In order not to be misinterpreted, Ritzer did not write a book about McDonald's, or even fast food industry, but he used McDonald's as a broader example or a 'paradigm' of a wide-reaching process that he called



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McDonaldization, that is, the process by which the principles of fast food restaurants prevail an increasing number of segments of American society, and further spread on the rest of the world. McDonaldization did not refer only to hospitality industry, but it also spread its influence on education, health care, travel, free time, eating habits, politics, family life, basically, it affected almost every aspect of society. He described the success of McDonaldization through four attractive dimensions. In short, McDonald's is successful because it offers consumers, workers and management as well, efficiency, profitability, predictability and control. He established without any doubt that McDonaldization led to positive examples such as: the growth of the goods and services market, the possibility to obtain whatever is necessary almost immediately, the fact that goods and services of different types are equalized in quality, and, due to quantification, consumers can more easily compare competing products. Moreover, the probability of treating people in a similar way, regardless of their race, gender or social status, is increased, organizational and technological innovations spread faster and easier through networks of identical subsidiaries. However, despite all these benefits, Ritzer also mentioned the downside of McDonaldization..

Efficiency, predictability, profitability and control through non-human technology can be considered basic components of a rational system. However, irrationality is inevitably born from a rational system. He studies the downsides of McDonaldization through the irrationality of rationality, so he paradoxically calls it the fifth dimension of McDonaldization. McDonaldization has caused harmful effects on the environment. The feeling of being 'on a conveyor belt' is proven to be inhumane in the form of work and dining. Therefore, he concludes that although a large part of the world is McDonaldized, at least three forms of society have successfully managed to avoid it. In that context, he mentions postmodern society, undertakings that defy McDonaldization, and that the world has entered a new 'postmodern age' where society is much less rationalized than before. He states bureaucracy as a great achievement of the modern West, and describes it as a highly developed organization which is composed of hierarchically organized regulations. As the roots of the modern reflection on bureaucracy go back to Max Weber, they represent an integral part of his broader theory on the process of rationalization.

Weber states that modern West has produced a specific type of rationality, more precisely, formal rationality, explaining that formal rationality means that the human search for optimal means to achieve the goal is shaped by rules, regulations and wider social structures (Ritzer, McDonaldization and its precursors, 36). According to Weber, it is one of the most significant developments in world history. He praised the bureaucracy, his paradigm of formal rationality and listed the most important advantages: the four basic dimensions of rationalization (and McDonaldization). He compares bureaucracy to a fast food restaurant which is strictly defined by four components of formal rationality: efficiency, predictability, quantification, and control through the replacement of human technologies with non-human ones. He described his greatest concern with the term 'iron cage of rationality'.

Defining bureaucracy through a 'cage', he claimed that people are caught in a trap and their basic humanity is denied. He predicted the emergence of a society in which people are stuck in a series of rational structures, moving only from one rational system to the other, concluding that society would turn into invisible networks of rational structures from which there would be no way out. Referring to the given answer, it can be established that George Ritzer personally believed that fast food restaurant has become a modern model of rationalization, as he found a theoretical base in Weber's theory, and also predicted the same kind of iron cage as Weber feared. Finding its starting point in sociological classics, the importance of sociological classics as a source of new theories and discussions is actually confirmed.



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# ACTUALITY OF SOCIOLOGICAL THEORIES THROUGH THE CONCEPT OF TRENDS

The concept of trends is indispensable while connecting sociological classics with the modern age, so it is necessary to observe the actuality of sociological theories through the concept of trends. According to Sergio Benvenuto, in the 20th century a lot was written about fashion, but there were few systematic theories of fashion. He highlights previously mentioned Georg Simmel and his work 'Fashion' as the only real attempt at a general theory of fashion, which is still relevant although it was published as far back as 1895. Fashion is a process that can also appear in spheres that have nothing to do with clothes, whereas clothing consists of items adapted to our needs: 'While our clothes are basically adapted to our needs, the decisions that form fashion are neither ruled by the slightest trail of practicality, nor whether wide or tight skirts, long or short haircuts, colorful or black ties are worn. Sometimes modern things are so ugly and repulsive, as if fashion itself tries to demonstrate power precisely by making us accept even the most disgusting things because of it' (Simmel, 2001).

According to Simmel, fashion as a social fact- that is, non-cumulative change of cultural characteristics- arises from the basic tension specific to the social condition of the human being: on the one hand, the tendency of each of us to imitate someone else, and on the other hand, the tendency of each of us to differ from others (The Fashion of Georg Simmel, Sergio Benvenuto, 2000). Furthermore, he states that contradictory incentives are necessary for fashion trends to work. He also sees fashion as an example of how real social life always includes, in a way, its opposite, asocial life. It is very interesting how Simmel established the principle 'fashion (...) is a product of class difference' where the impulse to behave- and thus to imitate, unify, equalize- is not directed towards any of our neighbors; instead, we imitate someone who, on one way or another, is superior to us (Georg Simmel, Fashion).

This Simmer's principle has been relevant for many years, and even today, when in all parts of society, in economy, in politics, there is an urge to imitate, which manifests the appeal of fashion. Furthermore, like fashion- which often oscillates between two opposite poles- sociological classics find their relevance in the present as well- where through the special characteristics of fashion, they enable social obedience, which is at the same time a form of individual differentiation, and through the success of the Western democratic model and its values, one can observe the ostentatious development of fashion and in that way confirm the relevance of sociological classics.

## SOCIOLOGY OF THE MODERN AGE

Sociology is a social science that arised in the 19th century due to great revolutions, mostly to the political, i.e. the French Revolution, and later the industrial revolution, so it was legitimate to ask ourselves in which direction sociology will develop later, and which themes will occupy the sociologists in the modern age. In the late 20th and the start of the 21st century four theories of great significance arised. All of them offer a conceptual tool, but they also deal with overlapping themes such as forming of identity, the impact of science and technology on the formation of society and roles that information and information technologies play in the organization of modern social life. The queer theory is a perspective that deals with the construction of sex and sexuality. Actor-Network Theory is a perspective that arises from a wider field of study and technological studies. The social movement impact theory is focused on the estimation of the impact of social movements on the society, and the factors that could



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have led to those effects. The last theory of importance is the theory of presumption, a perspective that tries to overcome the usual sociological difference between production and consumption. We could point out C. Wright Mill as the most applicable author. The modern sociologist C. Wright Mill set sociological imagination as a frame for the connection of personal challenges and social questions of bigger importance. Through sociological imagination, sociologists are developing a certain way of thinking so they could explain how those personal experiences, together with their challenges, impact on the wider society in which we operate. Better understanding of relation between personal and public questions can help us have a bigger impact on the outcome on all levels.

## CONCLUSION

Every day we can witness research of the social relations and human behavior in our society, and in many areas of our lives we witness speculations so we could explain how our personal experiences, together with our challenges, impact the wider society in which we operate. Better understanding of relation between personal and public questions can help us have a bigger impact on the outcome on all levels. Sociological theories, or sociology itself has found its implementation in daily life and daily themes like crime, religion, family relations, race and gender identity, class divisions, communities, cultures and social stability. Sociologists identify and evaluate the influence of cultural trends, beliefs and values on the behavior of an individual and identify those factors using sociological research which includes observing behavior of a bigger collective group which consists of individuals in the same area with the same social influences. We are assuming that if we can reach a better understanding of personal and public questions, we can help influence the outcome on all levels, and we can conclude that we can achieve a considerably improved outcome.

Furthermore, it is very important to mention the fact that sociology has even found its way in business, education and all other areas of the modern age. Assessment of human behavior is on all levels, from micro level to macro level, searching for patterns inside and between bigger groups and smaller societies. Starting from the standpoint that sociological classics have created the foundation for development of sociology as an independent science discipline, and considering the applicability of sociology in the research of social relations and human behavior in our society, it is unquestionable to affirm the importance and applicability of sociological classics in the modern age.

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