CONTESTED KNOWLEDGE
## Contents

**Preface** vii  
**Acknowledgments** x  

Introduction 1  

### Part I  The Rise of the Classical Tradition 7  

Introduction to Part I 9  
1  The Idea of a Science of Society: The Enlightenment and Auguste Comte 11  
2  The Revolutionary Theory of Karl Marx 22  
3  The Promise of Sociology: Emile Durkheim 36  
4  The Ironic Social Theory of Max Weber 48  
Afterword to Part I 61  

### Part II  Rethinking the Classical Tradition: American Sociology 65  

Introduction to Part II 67  
5  The Grand Theory of Talcott Parsons, Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann 70  
6  The Scientific Theory of Randall Collins and Peter Blau 86  
7  The Moral Sociology of C. Wright Mills and Robert Bellah 97  
Afterword to Part II 113  

### Part III  Rethinking the Classical Tradition: European Theory 115  

Introduction to Part III 117  
8  The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas 119
Contents

9 Stuart Hall and British Cultural Studies 132
10 The Critical Sociology of Anthony Giddens and Pierre Bourdieu 140
Afterword to Part III 152

Part IV Revisions and Revolts: The Postmodern Turn 155

Introduction to Part IV 157
11 The Postmodern World of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean Baudrillard 159
12 Michel Foucault’s Disciplinary Society 175
13 Zygmunt Bauman’s Sociology of Postmodernity 188
Afterword to Part IV 197

Part V Revisions and Revolts: Identity Politics and Theory 201

Introduction to Part V 203
14 Feminist Theory/Masculinity Studies 205
15 Critical Race Theory/White Studies 226
16 Lesbian, Gay, and Queer Theory/Heterosexual Studies 239
17 Colonial Discourse Studies 254
Afterword to Part V 263

Part VI Revisions and Revolts: Theories of World Order 267

Introduction to Part VI 269
18 From Nation to Globe: David Held and Mary Kaldor 271
19 Global Capitalism: Immanuel Wallerstein and Manuel Castells 281
20 The Return of Empire? Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, David Harvey and Michael Mann 290
Afterword to Part VI 300

Part VII The Rise of Postdisciplinary Theory 303

Introduction to Part VII 305
21 Theorizing Postcolonial Nationalism: A Case of “Domain” Theorizing 308
22 Jeffrey Alexander: Reconstructing Democratic Theory in an Age of Disillusionment 320
23 Nancy Fraser: The Case for Radical Democracy 331
Afterword to Part VII 341

Index 344
I am very much a child of the sixties. I dropped out of college, looked to my body as a source of pleasure and rebellion, and marched to change the world. I imagined the social sphere as a field of enormous possibilities for self- and collective renewal. As the sixties dead-ended in drugs, violence, and either political extremism or liberal accommodation, I followed the hordes of the middle class into graduate school. I looked to sociology as a discipline that would help make sense of my individual and collective world while also contributing to envisioning a different and better future.

I recall the disillusionment of my first few years as a sociologist. I expected my colleagues to share my moral vision of sociology. The reality was sobering. My colleagues, whom I admired for their research skills and their accomplishments, hardly read outside of their specialty areas; few of them deliberately linked their scholarship to public debates and controversies; much of the culture of sociology in the 1980s and 1990s seemed parochial—a world where “scientific” talk and status anxieties produced an insulated expert culture. I was distraught at the wreckage of professionalization: smart, well-intentioned individuals with good values, whose intellect was disciplined by a culture that often ignored history, non-American and non-“Western” cultures, and that lacked strong ties to a public world of moral and political debate.

I rebelled. I turned to the roots of modern social thought in order to call sociology to task for abandoning its moral promise. In the 1980s, I undertook a study of the Enlightenment origins of European social theory. The passion that previously went into personal and social rebellion was now channeled into a quest to reform sociology. I hoped to find in the original inspiration of modern social theory a warrant for approaching sociology as having a moral and political purpose. I found what I was looking for: the philosophes and the classics viewed social analysis as a vehicle of social critique and change.

As the memories of the 1960s faded, my own writings became obscure. In the apolitical spirit of America in the 1980s, I was absorbing the disciplinary culture of sociology. I started thinking of myself as a “theorist,” as if theory had its own problems and value apart from social analysis and critique. I was losing myself in “theory”
discussions. My work was starting to feel sterile and pointless. I felt alienated from my original moral and political motives for becoming a sociologist.

The AIDS crisis jolted me. It was 1981. I remember reading of the mysterious disease that was taking the lives of gay men. I recall the media hysteria, the homophobic public response, and the governmental neglect. I was living in New Mexico trying to finish a book on the classical social theorists. As I was preoccupied with Marx’s *Capital* or Durkheim’s *Suicide*, the fatalities from AIDS seemed to be growing exponentially. The AIDS epidemic fed into a backlash against the social rebellions of the 1960s. America, once again, seemed in the throes of a major political and cultural war. As a leftist and gay man, my life felt raw and vulnerable. The progressive culture that I valued was under attack. AIDS was an enemy killing off my friends and threatening me personally. In the midst of this social and personal upheaval, my work on classical sociology felt more and more pointless, as did the field of sociology in general.

In a manner of speaking, I took leave of sociology in the early 1980s. I finished the book on classical social theory. But my focus had definitely shifted. AIDS and the backlash against the progressive movements of the 1960s gripped me. I began clipping out everything that appeared in the press on AIDS and the social backlash. I stopped reading sociology and sociological theory. As the politics of the body, sexuality, gender, and knowledge moved to the center of my life, I found myself absorbed in the texts of feminism, gay and lesbian studies, race theory, poststructuralism, and cultural studies. In the course of reading and writing in these areas, I had for all practical purposes ceased being part of the sociological community.

And yet, I have returned to sociology. I write this book, in part, as a sociologist. Why?

Perhaps I was drawn back to the discipline the way a young adult, having achieved a certain independence and individuality, returns to his or her original family with a newfound sense of belonging. Sociology was the community that originally nourished me and provided me with new ways of thinking about myself and the social world. I have learned that, as much as I resist sociology, I am ever drawn to it. I have realized that this discipline is a home of sorts for me. I like to think of sociology as a sort of extended family or, better yet, a church. We quarrel with passion and sometimes fury, because many of our deepest beliefs and values are attached to our social ideas and because we care dearly about each other, if not always in an intimate way, then as individuals who share a similar disciplinary history and culture.

I have returned to sociology, but I am not quite the same person that I was before my “travels.” Like anyone who spends considerable time in an alien culture, I have come to see my native land as just one among many cultures. I have relativized the premises, concepts, and knowledges of sociology. In particular, I have come to see the theory debates among postwar sociologists as simply one tradition of debate about “the social world.” Sociological theorists have wrongly imagined that their central problems, for example, the logic of social action and order, the dispute over the validity of conflict versus order paradigms, or the question of the relation between the micro and macro levels of analysis, pertain to the very nature of “the social.” The presumption is that if anyone, at any time, were to think seriously about the social world he or she would end up centering reflection on these issues. This is, as anthropologists would say, an example
of ethnocentrism, a practice that claims universality and validity for the particular values and ideas of one group. For example, postwar Western feminists have not defined these theory problems as central. Instead, feminist debate has revolved around questions of the natural and social aspects of gender, the concept of gender as a master category of social explanation, the origins of male dominance, the relation between the private and public realm, the nature of identity and difference, and the multiple character of domination and resistance.

Relativizing sociological theory does not mean denying its importance. There is much in sociological theory that is valuable and worth defending; in particular its social understanding of the self, its rich conceptual language for understanding institutions and whole societies, its accounts of social development, order, and crisis, and its tradition of cultural social studies. And yet, sociological theory has all too often, especially in the last few decades, become isolated from public life and has chased the idol of science to a point of its own obscurity. Much sociological theory has abandoned a moral and political intention to engage the world as a medium of critical analysis and change.

I return to sociology as I initially came to the discipline, with the hope of finding a home where social analysis is valued because it is inspired by a will to make a better world. This does not mean giving up empirical analysis; nor does it mean abandoning analytical perspectives. However, I do believe that the purpose of sociology is not to accumulate knowledge, establish a science of society, or build a system of sociology, but to be part of the ongoing conversation and conflict over the present and future shape of the social world. The hope that has guided sociology and modern social theory for some 200 years is that knowledge can make a difference in our lives and that its chief value lies in the kinds of lives it imagines and helps to create. This hope is what inspired this volume.
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Introduction

Modern social theory has been inspired by a noble purpose: to advance human freedom. By conceiving of the human condition as fundamentally social and historical, the social sciences anticipated the possibility that societies could rationally fashion their own destiny. If social customs and institutions are understood as products of human actions, not natural or divine law, couldn’t they be shaped to benefit all of humanity?

The social scientist was imagined as a public educator whose chief task was public enlightenment. In their quest for truth, social scientists would illuminate the social dangers to freedom and the prospects for progress. The pioneers of the social sciences, thinkers such as Montesquieu, Condorcet, Marx, Comte, Weber, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and W. E. B. Du Bois, invented new and imaginative ways of understanding the origin and organization of the social world. Their ideas addressed matters of considerable moral and political significance, for example, the origins of inequality, the bureaucratic threat to freedom, the state of the Negro in society, and the exploitation of women. For the founding figures of the social sciences, knowledge was valued as a means of promoting social progress.

Contemporary sociological theory has not abandoned this social purpose. Sociologists continue to provide critical perspectives on the present that aim to enlighten a broad public. Yet sociological theory and, to a lesser extent, sociology in general, have become more and more isolated from public life, to the detriment of both sociology and public life. As sociological theorists have retreated from their role as public educators, their ideas have lost social relevance. Moreover, the general public suffers from theorists’ diminishing social authority. Sociological theory has been a catalyst of public debate and an important provider of critical social perspectives. As theorists and many sociologists become preoccupied with insular disciplinary concerns, public officials, activists, policy-makers, journalists, and media commentators have assumed the chief role of public intellectuals. Unfortunately, these individuals, though often thoughtful and insightful, are usually focused narrowly on specific issues
Introduction

or political events such as gays in the military or the Middle East conflicts or electoral politics; they are pressured to meet commercial deadlines and standards. Accordingly, their social ideas often lack the conceptual and historical depth that has been part of the social sciences. A vigorous democratic public culture is nourished by the social ideas crafted by sociologists and critical social scientists.

Why has sociological theory become increasingly isolated from public life? Sociology continues to produce theorists of impressive talent, but its culture is more and more removed from a general public culture. The growing insularity of sociological theory reflects, in part, the fact that theorists are often oriented to members of their own expert culture. Much of current sociological theory simply does not speak a broad public language; the conventions and concerns of this disciplinary culture render their ideas either inaccessible to a general public or irrelevant to the ways in which the moral and political issues of the day are discussed in everyday life. The sad truth is that sociological theory, especially in the United States, is hardly read today beyond a small circle of academic theorists.

If sociological theory is in trouble, one reason is the quest for an overarching theory of society and history. From Comte through Parsons, Habermas, and Randall Collins, theorists have tried to discover the underlying principles of social order and social change. These theorists believe that there are very general problems such as the nature of social action and social order or the relationship between the individual and social institutions that are at the core of social knowledge. It is the task of theory to settle these so-called foundational issues or to uncover the universal principles of social life. A core of theoretical principles would then guide social research and social analysis. Unfortunately, theorists have been unable to achieve anything approaching consensus on the core premises, concepts, and explanatory models of social knowledge. And, sadly, theorists’ aspiration to provide secure foundations for social knowledge has often led them into a series of arcane conceptual and methodological debates that have largely proved fruitless. Sociological theorists are in danger of losing the attention of both researchers and the public.

Sociology needs to recover its role as public educator in order to contribute to a more measured and thoughtful public discussion. In this regard, I would like to see sociological theory regain its focus on issues of broad public significance. Instead of being driven by narrow disciplinary conventions and disputes, theorists should seriously try to address the key social and political debates of our time, and in an accessible language. Theorists need to recover the moral impulse at the heart of social theory, and to see themselves, once again, as public educators engaging the issues of the day. Contested Knowledge is animated by the original promise of modern social thinking: the idea that social theory can produce ideas that would help create a better world.

CONFLICTING VIEWS OF SOCIAL THEORY

Since the Enlightenment, the very meaning of social theory has been debated. Three views of theory have been at the center of debate: theory as scientific, philosophical, and moral.
**Introduction**

*Scientific social theory assumes that science is the only method capable of achieving reliable social knowledge. Our common-sense ideas about society as well as the social understandings of poets and novelists, journalists and social commentators, are said to express personal values and opinions. Science tells us what is real and true. The ideal of the social sciences is to discover ideas that mirror the world; by contrast, the ideas of ordinary folk mirror personal beliefs or political ideology.*

Scientific theorists aim to discover laws or principles that apply to human behavior in all societies, past and present. For example, Auguste Comte searched and thought he found the laws that govern how societies establish order and change; Marx wanted to uncover the laws of capitalism; the American sociologists Randall Collins and Peter Blau tried to gather together the principles that govern key aspects of social life, for example, social conflict, order, change, peace, and war. For these theorists, the sciences of physics or biology serve as models for social theory. True knowledge requires that observations, research, and facts be organized as general principles or laws that are proven through repeated testing.

*Philosophical approaches share with scientific theorists the aim to reveal timeless social truths. In some ways, philosophically oriented theorists are even more ambitious than scientific ones. Not content with uncovering general principles or social laws, philosophical theorists aspire to develop sweeping, overarching theories of human behavior and social evolution. However, instead of developing their ideas from observations and facts, philosophical theorists believe that research must be preceded by rigorous conceptual thinking. Before we can observe and record social life we must have certain ideas about the nature of social life. Do we focus on the individual or on social groups? Are individuals agents who shape society or do individuals mostly adapt to social forces? And, which social forces – religion, the economy, class, or bureaucracy – are the most important in shaping social life? In short, philosophical theorists aim to establish the core categories and ideas about human behavior and social life that would guide researchers. Perhaps the two greatest thinkers in this tradition are Talcott Parsons and Jürgen Habermas. As we’ll see, they approach theory as a serious discursive project. Theory involves reasoning about the most basic aspects of social life, for example, how is social order possible or is there a pattern to social change across centuries? The aim of theory, say the philosophical theorists, is to provide the foundational concepts and ideas that will guide the work of researchers and social analysts.*

The styles of scientific and philosophical theorists are very different. Scientific theorists work primarily with the observations and facts produced by researchers. They aim to organize empirical research into a set of social principles or laws. By contrast, philosophical theorists spend considerable time thinking about the ideas of other thinkers as they develop their own views about human behavior and social life. Parsons’ major work, *The Structure of Social Action*, was a study of the ideas of several European thinkers; no research was discussed. His aim was to develop a general theory of social action. Similarly, Habermas’s *A Theory of Communicative Action* is a virtual tour through European and American philosophy and social theory from the mid-nineteenth century to the present; he aspired to reveal the essential structure of human communication as the foundation for a general theory of society.
Theorists have tried not only to understand but to change society. While many thinkers believe that their social role should be confined to revealing social truths, others maintain that theory should contribute to changing social life. These thinkers endorse a *moral vision of social theory*. From this point of view, social knowledge is valuable because of its potential to make the world a better place to live.

Approaching theory as a moral or critical practice has been a key part of modern social thinking. Many theorists have crafted powerful social views that advocate specific social and political responses to threats to freedom and democracy. Theorists have proposed powerful critical analyses of class conflict, male dominance, the decline of religious faith, the crisis of solidarity, and the bureaucratization of society. The aim of a morally inspired theory is to alert the public to a social danger in order to prompt and sometimes guide political action.

Think of Marx’s exposé of capitalism as a class-divided, exploitative type of society. His critique of capitalism aimed to contribute to a working-class social revolt. Or, to take another example, Robert Bellah and his colleagues composed *Habits of the Heart*, an empirically rich social analysis of the US, in order to alert Americans to the dangers of a culture that championed individual self-interest at the expense of community values. Feminists and queer theorists have offered critical social perspectives that challenge male and heterosexual dominance; their critiques played a pivotal role in the making of movements for gender and sexual justice.

A moral approach to theory and social analysis does not mean giving up a commitment to truth or empirical knowledge. However, thinkers who emphasize the political and moral meaning of social thinking may not necessarily view theory or research as always capable of producing hard and fast truths. These thinkers defend a distinct role for sociologists: social analysis as social criticism. For these thinkers, truths may be possible, but we cannot and should not abandon our moral and political commitment to a better world.

Despite the prominence of scientific and philosophical approaches, most theorists have in fact not given up on a moral vision of social science. Most theorists would still, if push came to shove, concede that social knowledge finds its ultimate value in whatever good for humanity comes of it. The tribe of theorists and social scientists are, by and large, a good lot, who care about people and believe that their efforts should be socially beneficial. Yet the sad truth is that this moral hope is often not acknowledged as an important criterion in judging the worth of social research and theory. It is, for most social scientists, simply a hope, a heartfelt hope, but one that is not supposed to influence decisions about methods, concepts, explanations, and research aims. This does not mean that the values and moral vision of the social scientist do not find a prominent place in social research. No matter how much a social scientist may wish to expunge moral commitments from his or her work, they remain. Unfortunately, though, while moral commitments shape social science, they are often not acknowledged or reflected upon in the work we do.

These three views of social theory are *styles* of theorizing. Often, thinkers combine these styles. Marx simultaneously engaged in a philosophical analysis of concepts, sought to uncover the laws of capitalism, and was a fierce critic of modern societies. Talcott Parsons’ *The Structure of Social Action* was a philosophical analysis of the
Introduction

concept of social action. Subsequently, Parsons sought to apply his theoretical ideas by offering empirical explanations of Nazism, family dynamics, and modern racism. And, this tireless defender of social truth was also a relentless champion of American liberal pluralism against the socialist left and a conservative right.

There are, though, tensions among these approaches. For example, scientific approaches are hostile to the intrusion of values or political convictions into social analysis. Yet as much as scientific approaches want to stick to “just the facts,” facts and observations often cannot adjudicate between different conceptual approaches. A philosophical analysis of concepts is often necessary to get at the deeper conceptual underpinnings of empirical disputes about the social world. Or, in its quest for logically compelling foundational concepts, a philosophical approach often becomes entangled in obscure debates that are far removed from the concerns of researchers and activists or policy makers. And those who embrace a moral style must struggle with reconciling partisanship with the ideals of scholarship. Even strong advocates of a moral vision of human studies must concede that the very effectiveness of their ideas may depend on their public authority, an authority that may be weakened by their partisanship. The vital tension between a scientific, philosophical, and a moral vision will be examined as we analyze the contemporary significance of social theory.
## Part I

### The Rise of the Classical Tradition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction to Part I</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 The Idea of a Science of Society: The Enlightenment and Auguste Comte</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Auguste Comte</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 The Revolutionary Theory of Karl Marx</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The Unity of Theory and Practice</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Historical Materialism: A Revolutionary Science</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Das Kapital</em>: The Logic of Social Revolution</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Tensions between a Scientific and Moral Vision</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 The Promise of Sociology: Emile Durkheim</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Durkheim’s Liberal Vision of History and Modernity</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- <em>Suicide</em>: Individualism and Community Revisited</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Science, Truth, and Moral Hope</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 The Ironic Social Theory of Max Weber</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Puritanism and the Making of the Middle Class</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Explaining Western Modernity and the Irony of History</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Charisma and Bureaucracy: The Modern Dream Turned Nightmare</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Science, Truth, and Values</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Afterword to Part I</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction to Part I

Every group and society seems to develop its own views of human behavior. Perhaps this reflects our reliance on planning rather than instinct to survive; or perhaps it’s inherent in a species that uses language to think and communicate. In any event, we find that, throughout history, human association has been accompanied by ideas about human motivation, social interaction, and social order. However, not all societies have produced “social thought” or something like a deliberate and methodical effort to provide secular explanations of social life. Similarly, not all societies have created social institutions (e.g., universities, publishing companies, journals) and social roles (e.g., professors, social critics, and commentators) whose purpose is to analyze and debate the truthfulness of social ideas.

It is impossible to locate the origins of social thought. In many of the so-called ancient civilizations (China, Egypt, Greco-Roman), we observe diverse traditions of social thought. For example, in ancient Greece, Plato, Aristotle, and Thucydides crafted social analyses of war, the origins of the family and the state, and the relation between religion and the government. Aristotle’s Politics offers a rich social account of the formation of different political systems and the interconnections between the individual, family, culture, and politics. Although thinkers like Plato and Aristotle were insightful about humanity and society, most historians do not credit them as founding figures of the social sciences.

What makes the social thought of premodern times different from social science? Perhaps it’s that the social sciences hold different assumptions about the world and about social knowledge than do the traditions of premodern social thought. Ancient and Christian social thought often viewed the universe as an unchanging hierarchical order in which all beings, human and otherwise, had a more or less fixed and proper place and purpose. Premodern social thought often approached human behavior as part of a conception of the overall natural and moral structure of the universe. For example, Aristotle’s social thought was less concerned with explaining social patterns
The Rise of the Classical Tradition

such as the role of social class in shaping politics than with sketching an ideal society in the context of a comprehensive philosophy of life. Social science has abandoned the static, hierarchical world view of its Greek and Christian predecessors. Modern social scientists have, in the main, abandoned the effort to craft a comprehensive philosophy of life. Social science occupies a different world of ideas than premodern “Western” social thought.

In the next four chapters, we take a first glance at the world of modern social thinking. Eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Europe was the principal home for the birth of social science. Beginning with the ideas of the Enlightenment, we trace the development of modern social theory in the work of Auguste Comte, Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. These thinkers make up the core of what is considered the classical tradition of modern social theory.
The Idea of a Science of Society
The Enlightenment and Auguste Comte

Eighteenth-century Europe gave rise to some remarkable social thinkers, including Voltaire, Hume, Adam Ferguson, Condorcet, Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Mary Wollstonecraft. Although they wrote widely on philosophy, natural science, and literature, they produced an impressive body of social ideas. Of particular importance, Enlightenment social thinkers (Enlighteners) broke away from the Greek and Christian traditions of social thought. They pioneered a new science of society.

Although the Enlighteners took up the cause of science with the enthusiasm of crusaders, they were not its original creators. The great breakthroughs to a scientific world view occurred from the fifteenth through the seventeenth centuries, the result of the efforts of Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, and Newton. From the perspective of that time period, the commitment to science amounted to a serious challenge to the prevailing Aristotelian–Christian world view. In early modern Europe, the universe was seen as a hierarchical order in which every being (human, animal, plant, spiritual) had a rightful place and purpose in a divinely created and ordered universe. The natural and social worlds were viewed as being spiritually infused with value, meaning, and purpose. By contrast, the scientific revolution conceived of the universe as a mechanical system composed of matter in motion that obeyed natural laws. Both divine purpose and human will became peripheral, indeed unnecessary, features of the scientific world view.

If the Enlighteners were not the creators of the scientific revolution, they were its great popularizers and propagandists. Through their writing and speeches, they proved indispensable in introducing science to educated Europeans. Moreover, they were themselves innovators, less in their efforts in the natural sciences than in the study of human behavior. They dismissed much of previous social thought as based on prejudice, opinion, revelation, philosophical reasoning, and tradition; true knowledge, they asserted, can only rest on the solid ground of fact and scientific method. Departing from views of society as a divine or natural order, the Enlighteners
understood society as a “field” of individual interaction responsive to human intentions. The Enlighteners created a social world view that has become dominant in the modern West. At its core is the notion that humans create society; through our actions we shape a world of institutions which in turn shape us; the interplay between individuals and social institutions determines the history and future of humanity. The aim of a science of society is to reveal the common patterns of human association across different societies.

The Enlighteners championed the scientific world view, but only after they had altered it to suit their own purpose. Like many educated men and women of the time, they saw in the scientific world view a triumph of reason over prejudice. However, they were troubled by this revolution in thinking to the extent that science projected the universe as a purely materialistic, mechanical place with no room for freedom and morality. It was perhaps the genius of Montesquieu, Adam Smith, and Condorcet that they were able to wed science to a liberal humanistic world view. This was achieved by conceiving human history as a product of individual actions yet patterned in a law-like way. Thus, in his great work *The Spirit of the Laws*, Montesquieu traced the variations in political systems to both natural and social factors such as geography, climate, and religion while claiming to demonstrate that this variation was limited by the constraints of human nature.1 Similarly, in his grand vision of history as the march of human progress, Condorcet believed that the drive to human freedom explains why some societies progress more quickly than others; at the same time, he believed that our common human nature creates important similarities between different societies.2

The thinkers of the Enlightenment aimed both to understand human behavior and to use science to promote freedom and progress. But, how can science be both a morally neutral instrument of knowledge and a vehicle of social progress? In a Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind, Condorcet argued that the very nature of science – its reliance upon facts and observation, its openness to criticism and revision – promotes individualism, tolerance, equality, and democracy. Accordingly, he thought that the progress of science automatically translates into social progress. Today, in the aftermath of Nazism, Hiroshima, and widespread revelations about scientific torture and control through medicine and psychiatry, we would surely question whether science is necessarily wedded to liberal and humanistic values. Is it not possible that the Enlighteners read their own liberal values into science? Many Enlightenment thinkers held that, by discerning the laws of history, social science would have insight into the correct social norms and social policies. But how do we guard against the possibility that the so-called objective laws of history might, in fact, be colored by the social values and interests of the scientist? If social knowledge is to guide social affairs, we need to be certain that our social ideas truly mirror the objective, not our subjective, world. But how can we be certain of this?

The social motivation of Enlightenment thinkers raises further suspicions that their scientific vision was not innocent of moral and political meanings. The figures of the Enlightenment lived in a period of social turmoil. European societies were divided between social groups that defended social hierarchy and the status quo (the church and landed aristocracy) and groups such as commercial entrepreneurs
and peasants and laborers who struggled for freedom, equality, and democracy. The Enlighteners were mostly from socially privileged backgrounds (sons of nobility or parliamentarians) but were typically not members of the ruling clerical and aristocratic elite. Their livelihood was guaranteed neither by the ruling elite nor by an independent university system of the kind that developed in the twentieth century. As educated men with few social privileges, their sympathies generally were with those who wanted to bring about social change.

The Enlighteners were participants in the social struggles of the time. Their activities as polemists and social critics carried serious risk, from fines and economic insecurity, to exile, imprisonment, even execution. Indeed, many of them wrote under assumed names, or penned essays in which the critical message was carefully camouflaged by humor or parody. Since they were typically not landowners or members of parliament, their battle site was culture. They fought against the beliefs and social norms that upheld a society organized around social hierarchy, intolerance, and inequality. In eighteenth-century France, the struggle was primarily against the Catholic hierarchy. At one level, Enlightenment thinkers fought for freedoms relating to public expression, free speech, and tolerance of dissent. At another level, their battles were centered on the very issue of which beliefs, values, and social norms should prevail in society. In other words, the Enlighteners challenged the very basis of the landed aristocracy and church hierarchy by disputing the legitimacy of a society organized on the basis of a Christian religious culture. In this regard, they took up the cause of science as a key part of their struggle to shape the future of Europe and humanity.

In light of the breakthroughs to a scientific world view by their predecessors, it is hardly surprising that the Enlighteners seized on science as a vehicle to challenge the Christian culture. Through the persecution of Galileo and other innovators of science for heresy, the public associated science with social rebellion. Moreover, the scientific world view was interpreted by both the church and its detractors as a grave threat to the Christian cosmology. In a universe that was viewed as governed by mechanical laws, God was rendered as little more than a peripheral, detached observer. As the role of God in natural and human affairs was reduced to that of a spectator, the social role of the church would diminish accordingly.

The world view of science challenged the public authority of the church. Science projected a universe in which all beings were reducible to matter in motion; the only differences that counted were those related to shape, force, mass, or velocity. Fundamental Christian beliefs about the existence of spiritual beings and actions (e.g., angels or divine incarnations) and about the very notion of a human soul differentiating us from animals were placed in doubt. Similarly, to the extent that science assumed that true knowledge is based on observations, facts, and scientific method, Christian knowledge founded upon revelation, tradition, and the authority of the church was discredited. Finally, we should notice the close tie between the social values associated with modern Western science and those of the Enlighteners. For example, the Newtonian universe placed all beings on an equal footing; scientific knowledge itself was not an inherited right or gift but a product of education and effort; natural laws apply to all beings in the universe. In short, the scientific revolution
seemed in tune with modern liberal values and the social agenda of those groups who wanted social reform. It was not, however, the generation of Galileo or Newton that translated the scientific cosmology into a social world view; it was the Enlighteners.

Whereas the first phase of the scientific revolution (from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries) still left God and the church in charge, in the second phase, initiated by the Enlighteners, God was a matter of personal belief and the church, a human institution deserving of no special public authority. The Enlighteners directly challenged the social power of the church and the landed aristocracy by criticizing religion as the source of knowledge, social norms, and public values. If true knowledge is based on observation and fact, then religion, which is based on revelation or tradition, is mere opinion or an illusion. Indeed, many Enlighteners accused the church of inventing Christianity in order to gain social privileges by keeping the masses in a state of awe, fear, and ignorance. The existing social order, with its alliance of the church hierarchy, monarch, and landed aristocracy, was viewed as a fragile artifice resting upon rather shaky religious foundations.

By championing the cause of science, the Enlighteners were able to mount a frontal assault upon the social status quo. Yet the very style of their criticism can just as easily be turned against them. If the church forged a world view that masked its desire for social power, is not the same true for the Enlighteners? Didn’t they intend to replace religion with science and priests with scientists? Is the claim that only science ensures true knowledge and guarantees social progress simply another ruse on the part of a rising social elite wishing to legitimate their desire for power?

Our suspicions gain credibility when we note that, for all their rhetoric of science as based on facts, observations, and method, the Enlighteners ignored the point that science, just like religion, rests upon ideas that cannot be scientifically proven. For example, the claims that humans are natural beings, that nature is uniform and lawlike, that observations yield knowledge, and that history is patterned and goal-directed cannot be proven by science. These beliefs are in the end matters of faith. Moreover, despite reassurances that their social explanations rested upon a bedrock of fact, their contemporaries and successive generations have raised grave doubts. For example, insisting on his scientific approach, Montesquieu declared: “I have not drawn my principles [of social organization] from my prejudices, but from the nature of things.” But did “the nature of things” reveal that climate, as Montesquieu believed, rather than religion or social class, is the main determinant of political systems? When Montesquieu proposed that cold climates produce individuals who are courageous, generous, and insensitive to pain, when he explained the “Englishmen’s love of liberty” by the impatience produced by cold weather, was he simply giving voice to “the nature of things,” or to his prejudices? Perhaps even more telling of the moral patterning of Enlightenment social thought are their grand stories of the march of human progress and the triumph of reason over superstition. These narratives look suspiciously like secular versions of Christian millennialism. We are, in short, left with the impression that the Enlightenment practice of science is as weak a guarantor of truth as religion. The cultural clash between the backers of religion and the proponents of science appears to be a battle over the shape of society and the right to legislate social norms and ideals.
The Idea of a Science of Society

For all their celebration of science as a medium of truth, the Enlighteners used science as a powerful instrument of social change. There is no reason to doubt the sincerity of their belief in science as the path to true knowledge. They accepted the equation that science equals truth precisely the way their predecessors professed Christianity – as a faith. Beliefs harden into a faith when they become the common-sense understandings of large segments of society. By the mid to late eighteenth century, science was already a central part of a secular humanistic world view that was valued by many educated Europeans. Moreover, many Europeans perceived science as both a symbol of a new enlightened era and a force of social progress. To champion science was to be in step with the march of human progress. Christianity may have been the object of the Enlightenment’s derision, but its faith that truth will bring salvation continued to animate even the enlightened mind.

The Age of Enlightenment may not have been the great turning point in human history that its greatest thinkers and many of their successors believed, but it was a period of great turmoil and change. The outlines of a new or “modern” type of society were visible in the expansion of commerce, the formation of liberal political institutions, and the emerging class organization of European societies. For many individuals, especially in the West, these changes were understood as representing major human progress. And, from this perspective, science stands as both a symbol of progress and a chief cause.

The champions of the Enlightenment had their detractors. Not everyone in the eighteenth century was an enthusiast of the Enlightenment. Critics disputed the equation that science equals truth and that the modern era points to inevitable human progress. The Enlightenment provoked a counter-Enlightenment. As in the former movement, the latter exhibited a great deal of diversity. “Romantic” critics such as the English poets Wordsworth and Coleridge championed intuition and affect, spiritual longings and the unity of nature, humanity and God.4 The great “conservative” social critics Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre insisted on a social ideal that valued religion and tradition.5 Revolutionary critics such as the French radicals Gracchus Babeuf and Charles Fourier defended egalitarian values that were tied to a pastoral, agrarian social ideal.6 Common to these varied strains of the counter-Enlightenment was a deep hostility towards economic individualism, the secularization of culture, the scientization of knowledge, and the doctrine of social progress.

As the new spirit of freedom and social change swept through Europe and the United States, the ideological conflicts among Enlighteners, and between them and counter-Enlightenment critics, intensified and moved into the center of public life. The question of the meaning and social significance of science was at the heart of these cultural clashes.

Successors to the Enlightenment science of society inherited the Enlighteners’ faith in science. They absorbed the great moral hopes that were attached to science. However, the heirs to the Enlightenment could hardly ignore the sobering realities of the excesses of the French Revolution or the many critics of Enlightenment secular humanism. At the start of the nineteenth century, it was the clash over ideas about science, society, and historical change that underlay the grand visions of the classics.
Comte lived in a period of extreme social upheaval in France. The high hopes many Europeans had of the French Revolution (1789) were dashed by its recourse to political terrorism and the failure to realize a new France. However, the ardent faith in liberty and progress inspired by the Age of Enlightenment did not disappear in the aftermath of the revolution. Comte shared in this Enlightenment faith. Like many of his contemporaries, he was dismayed by the restoration of monarchical rule in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Comte’s social thought was formed in a France that was torn between Enlighteners and revolutionaries on the one side and supporters of empire and monarchy on the other.

Comte observed that France in the first half of the nineteenth century was in a state of social crisis. The Enlightenment and the French Revolution went a long way towards undermining the old France, that had been dominated by the church and a wealthy, landed aristocracy. The revolution failed, however, to create a new France. The Enlighteners, especially the more radical elements who inspired the revolution (e.g., Rousseau and Robespierre) were right to expose the oppressive state of the peasants and laborers, and criticize the corruption of the church and aristocracy. Unfortunately, their utopian social hopes could not be translated into a realistic agenda of social reform. It was no accident that, once the revolutionaries had assumed power, their rule rapidly degenerated into fierce power struggles and violence, and brutal repression replaced reason and law. In this regard, Comte thought that the critics of the Enlightenment, mostly voices of conservative tradition and Catholic orthodoxy, were correct in criticizing the Enlightenment thinkers for failing to understand that social change has to be anchored in custom and tradition. However, these conservative critics voiced only one option: to defend the status quo against the chaos they anticipated being unleashed by the reforms of the Enlighteners. Comte did not think that this position was defensible in light of the far-reaching social changes that had occurred in the previous century. France was a nation on its way to becoming a modern industrial society; this was irreversible and a sign of social progress.

**Auguste Comte** (1798–1857) was born in Montpellier, France. Comte’s ideas were formed during the upheavals of the French Revolution and counter-revolutions. It’s not surprising then that Comte was especially concerned with how societies establish social order and how they change. Comte argued that societies evolved through a series of three stages. The driving force of social evolution was the ruling ideas of the time. The final stage, which Comte termed the positive stage, was guided by scientific knowledge. Comte imagined sociology to be the ultimate fruit of the age of science. Sociology would reveal the laws of social life, making possible great social progress.
France was in a transitional social state. The old France was dying. Restoring the monarchy and the power of the church and aristocracy would only incite social chaos. Change was inevitable. Yet the new France imagined by the revolutionaries – a society of universal rights, equality, mass democracy, and secular humanism – was an invitation to social disorder. Contrary to the faith of the Enlighteners, a new society could not be fashioned according to the dictates of a reason that legislates the laws and institutions of an ideal social order. Society is not a mere slab of clay that we can mold to our desires. Comte was convinced that it was this rationalist faith of the Enlighteners that resulted in the failure of the French Revolution. Social change must be anchored in the living traditions of a nation’s past and in an understanding of the principles of social order.

France was in a social crisis; it was polarized between advocates of radical change and defenders of a social order in decline. This made for a remarkably unstable social condition, as was manifest in the flip-flop in nineteenth-century France between republic, empire, and monarchy. Comte himself lived through seven different political regimes, from short-lived republican governments to restored monarchs and a Napoleonic empire. The social unrest was not just political; France was undergoing intensive industrialization, which created enormous social strains in a still largely agrarian society. The clerical and aristocratic ruling elite was being challenged by a powerful stratum of industrialists and bankers who were, in turn, threatened by discontented peasants, laborers, and craftsmen.

Comte wished to find a way out of this social impasse. He proposed a program of social reform that offered a social vision of France marching to the tune of social progress. The vehicle for this social reformation was to be a new science of society, which Comte called sociology.

Comte’s scientific vision of sociology

Comte felt that the current era was a turning point in history. Whereas some Europeans interpreted the current social crisis as symbolizing social decline, Comte understood it as marking the birth pangs of a new era of unlimited human progress.

In essence, the current crisis was cultural. France, like all of Europe, was in the throes of a great cultural change that would eventually shape the destiny of all societies. Humanity was about to undergo a great transformation in its cultural foundations. The change involved a shift from a religious and metaphysical to a scientific world view. The cultural collision between the religious, metaphysical, and scientific world views had reached a climax in nineteenth-century France. Underlying Comte’s perspective on the cultural crisis of Europe was a grand vision of the evolution of the human mind.

Comte thought that he had discovered a law governing the progress of the human mind. According to the so-called Law of the Three Stages, the human mind passes through three stages of thought: the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive. In the first stage, the theological, the human mind explains the origin and ultimate purpose of phenomena by reference to supernatural entities (e.g., spirits, divine beings, gods). A Christian world view would exemplify the theological stage. In the second stage, the metaphysical, human thought continues its search to uncover the first and final cause of things but appeals to essences or abstract forces (e.g., human reason or
natural law). The philosophical systems of Descartes or Leibniz illustrate the metaphysical stage. The final stage, the positive, abandons the search for essences, first causes, and final purposes in favor of explaining the interconnection and succession of facts. Philosophical or religious speculation gives way to the discovery of natural and social laws. The positive stage represents the era of the modern sciences.

Comte is not simply sketching a series of changes, but a progressive historical development. The sciences represent not just a successor world view to religion and philosophy, but a breakthrough from speculation to truth. As an heir to the Enlightenment, Comte believed that the discovery of a language of truth is a turning point for humanity. Truth will liberate humankind from the web of ignorance, illusion, and error that has slowed, sometimes to a halt, the march of human progress.

Comte believed that each science passes through these three stages, but at varying rates depending on their degree of difficulty. The most general and simple of the sciences precede those that are more concrete and complex. Thus, Comte proposed that mathematics and astronomy would reach the positive stage prior to physics, chemistry, biology and sociology. In other words, Comte thought that humankind would first be able to free itself from religious and metaphysical ideas in matters remote from human considerations (e.g., mathematics or astronomy or physics). Once our ideas about nature were freed from religious and metaphysical beliefs, it would be possible to apply a scientific approach to human affairs. Accordingly, sociology, as the study of humanity, is the last science to develop because it is the most complex and concrete.

Sociology is the queen of the sciences. Unlike the other sciences, which analyze one narrow segment of life, sociology integrates all knowledge about humanity. Comte relied upon biology for his guiding social imagery and language. Society is visualized in organic terms, as a system whose “needs” are met by the normal operation of its functionally interdependent parts. Like any organism, society grows in a slow, continuous, and linear way, exhibiting a movement from simplicity to complexity and from potentiality to self-realization. Sociology was to be the science of society; its aim was to discover the universal laws that govern the organization and evolution of humanity.

Comte conceived of sociology as consisting of two parts: statics and dynamics. Social statics analyzes the structure and functioning of society; it describes the elementary parts of society, their functions and interconnections. Social dynamics investigates the evolution of humanity; it reveals the source of change and its stages and direction. Comte’s aim was nothing less than to sketch the universal laws of social statics and dynamics, a project that he began in *The Course of Positive Philosophy* (1830–42) and completed in the *System of Positive Polity* (1851–4).7

Comte’s sociology began with the premise that every science has its own separate subject matter. Departing from the conventional wisdom of many Enlightenment thinkers, Comte thought that it was a mistake to conceive of society as a collection of individuals. Instead, he believed that society consisted of social interaction, social rules, and institutions that are independent of the psychology of individuals. Social statistics investigate the structure and functioning of this social world. The chief problem is to explain social order, especially in modern societies. Given the emphasis upon individualism promoted by an industrializing society, how is self-interest curbed