

Sociology: A Catholic Critique

Description

Sociology (*socius*, companion; *logos*, science) is the science of human society, including social institutions and relationships. Inspired by the social analyses of Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Karl Marx, it became established as a discipline distinct from history, psychology and moral philosophy around the turn of the 20th century, and is today classed among the “social” or “behavioral” sciences. Particularly influential to the field are Marx’s notions of reification (ascribing reality to social distinctions) and alienation (the estrangement of persons from their production); Durkheim’s concepts of social fact (social arrangements that are external to and coercive of actors) and anomie (sense of meaninglessness due to lack of social norms); and Weber’s thesis of the rationalization (growing dominance of bureaucracy and technical efficiency) of society and advocacy of “value-free” (that is, value neutral) inquiry by means of “*verstehen*” (interpreting action from the point of view of the actor).

Current sociology is characterized by multiple sub-specialties and theoretical approaches. These are usually grouped into three main schools or paradigms, which may be ranged according to the generality, or “level of analysis”, of the groups they study. At the most particular (“micro”) level, the *interactionist* paradigm (also known as microinteractionism, ethnomethodology or social psychology) is concerned with the relational interactions among individuals including the structure of conversations (Tannen), personal encounters (Garfinkel), and relationship networks (Granovetter). Georg Simmel (*Sociology*, 1908) and George Herbert Mead (*Mind, Self and Society*, 1934) provide much of the theoretical background for this school. The most prominent contemporary theorist is Erving Goffman (b. 1922), whose theory of dramaturgy analyzes social interaction on analogy with roles performed in a theater.

At the most general (“macro”) level of analysis, the *functionalist* paradigm (also called structural functionalism) considers the working of entire societies or global collectivities. Rooted in Talcott Parsons’ (d. 1979) comprehensive theory of social action, functionalists concentrate on matters of social structure such as occupational stratification and mobility (Lenski), standardization and bureaucratization (Ritzer) and global economic change (Bell). Individual behavior is conceived as the product of utilitarian rational choice, largely or completely determined by social structure. Functionalists draw on Durkheim and Weber for classical theory; like them, they are more concerned with religion and philosophy than the other paradigms. Peter Berger, concerned with the transmission of culture through symbol and socialization, is the most prominent contemporary functionalist.

At the intermediate (“meso”) level of analysis are theorists of the *conflict* paradigm, who examine the relations among institutions, organizations and social groups from the standpoint of their competition for power. Stemming from Marx’s social analysis—as distinct from his political theory—the conflict paradigm, in contrast to functionalism, focuses on social change rather than social order. Studies of power differentials due to race (Jencks), class (Domhoff), gender (Kanter) or geography (Wallerstein) typify the work of the conflict school. Marxist sociology (unlike Marxist theology or economics) is not necessarily radical; Anthony Giddens, the most prominent contemporary Marxist, offers an essentially conservative or functional view of the development of social structure through human interaction.

These categories are by no means comprehensive; other diverse agendas abound, evidencing both the field’s wide applicability and its lack of definitional consensus. With the development of inferential statistics, sociology in America has featured quantitative micro studies similar to psychology or economics; in Europe it has remained more macro and qualitative, akin to history or philosophy.

Evaluation

The relationship of sociology to the Catholic faith is a story of affinity followed by estrangement.

Both sociology and the Church's social teaching developed out of the matrix of intellectual forces of the late 19th century. From the start there was a general affinity between sociology's affirmation of the primacy of social reality and the communal orientation of Catholic doctrine and sensibilities. The labor question which occupied social reformers found special resonance among Catholic laity, most of whom were themselves immigrant wage-workers. And sociology's concern with correcting social inequities made common cause with the Catholic concern for social justice, a connection that continues to this day.

Most academic sociology departments in America, including many at Catholic institutions, were founded within 20 years of *Rerum Novarum*. By 1910 a steady stream of Catholic priest intellectuals had studied in Germany, the font of sociological knowledge, and brought the new perspective and methods back to the United States. Prominent among these were Fr. William Kerby of Catholic University, Fr. Frederick Seidenberg of Loyola University and labor activist Fr. Peter Dietz. The German Jesuit social theorist Fr. Heinrich Pesch, who developed a comprehensive economic theory based on the principle of solidarity rather than individual self-interest, was highly influential on these early Catholic sociologists.

The early work of Catholic sociologists in America explicitly advanced themes of the Church's nascent social teaching by means of a scientific analysis that commended them to a wider critical audience. The most successful example of this is the work of Fr. John Ryan, a disciple of Pesch. In 1906 (revised in 1912) Ryan published The Living Wage: Its Ethical and Economic Aspects, in which he operationalized *Rerum Novarum*'s principle of the living wage into a specific recommendation (\$600 per year) and policy plan for the United States. He then set about drafting minimum wage laws and working with liberal and feminist reformers to achieve their enactment, with some success. In 1919 Ryan's plan for postwar reconstruction was adopted by the Catholic bishops comprising the National Council of Catholic Welfare, a precursor to today's U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The elements of this plan were adopted in toto by the Democratic Party, and were almost all enacted as part of President Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal legislation of the 1930s.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that Catholic sociologists during this era simply saw sociology as a tool for social reform, simplistically propagated Church doctrine, or even were in full agreement about what constituted the Catholic vision of society. With the succession of depression, fascism and world war, the Church was faced with new and difficult questions; Catholic sociologists engaged in theological and doctrinal conversation, disputing legitimate questions of the day in search of a more complete Catholic understanding of social life. One wing advocated "distributism", a form of limited socialism; another defended a modified capitalism; and a radical element advocated heroic poverty and renunciation as the Catholic way to reform society. Characteristic of the time, however, was a broad confidence in the compatibility of Catholic faith with sociological analysis, with the attempt to articulate a moral vision of human society in accord with explicitly Catholic principles, that is, a Catholic sociology.

But with the rise of positivism (the rejection of metaphysics) and naturalism (the rejection of the supernatural) in American intellectual life in mid-century, sociology began to be estranged from its moral and reformist orientations. Abetted by the growing dominance of science, individualism and social conservatism, sociology forsook the religious and philosophical concerns of its founding fathers and took refuge in formalistic functionalism and increasingly sophisticated statistical methods. Ironically, this development was seen as a fulfillment of Weber's prophecy of the inexorable dominance of technical rationality in modern society.

The upheaval of social, moral and religious traditions of the 1960s was accompanied by the proliferation of sociological theories analyzing the growing secularization of society (Berger, Wilson, Turner). Among theologians, widespread dissent from Church doctrine following the Second Vatican Council (1963-65) reduced the distinction between Catholic and Protestant at the same time as widespread naturalism reduced the distinction between full-blown secularity and Protestant theology, which declared that God was dead. Accordingly, Catholic sociologists abandoned the project of a sociology based on Catholic doctrine. "Catholic sociology" came to denote nothing more than mainstream sociology that happened to study Catholic institutions or people, a specialty of the sociology of religion. In 1970 the American Catholic Sociological Society, founded in 1938, was renamed the Association for the Sociology of Religion. In Europe, the International Conference for Religious Sociology, founded in 1948 at the Catholic University of Louvain, became at about the same time the independent International Society for the Sociology of Religion. Note the transition from "religious sociology" to "sociology of religion".

Today the relationship of the Catholic faith to sociology is equivocal. On the one hand, a faithful Catholic reading must consider inadequate any account of human life and personhood that denies or marginalizes its supernatural origins and aspirations. A full understanding of human action must include the moral dimension, which "cannot be reduced to a body of knowledge worked out purely in the context of the so-called *behavioral sciences*." (*Veritatis Splendor 111*) Ignorant of this full truth about persons, late 20th-century sociology has presented a picture of human life that is, at best, simplistic and distorted. Most consequential for sociology have been the rejection of the Christian doctrines of creation, incarnation and redemption respectively. Rejecting personal creation which endows humans with dignity, human choice has been conceived as largely determined by such material attributes as race, gender, class, income or education operating through a technical calculus of "rational choice", confusing (in Thomistic language) accidents with causes. Proceeding by "methodological atheism" which rules out the intervention of God in history, sociologists have been blind to even the empirical effects of religious belief. And lacking any clear vision of human society, much less that presented in the Church's social teachings, sociology has become captive to a variety of limited, self-serving social agendas. These serious deficiencies have characterized even the work of "Catholic" sociologists who operate from premises of theological dissent and even those strains of current sociology which are sympathetic with the Church's social teaching, which consequently have been susceptible to Marxist theological assumptions.

On a Catholic analysis, this limited view of personhood is built into any social science, which can only observe attributes and not essences. Consequently sociology must always view humanity as an abstraction, and can never, in the words of Guardini, "take man simply as he is". This limitation only becomes problematic, however, when sociology presumes to be a full rather than a partial explanation of reality. The denial of larger truths about human life is not necessary or intrinsic to sociology, but stems from the naturalism that has guided it in the recent past.

Yet sociology has not adopted naturalism without reservation, or everywhere. Its religiously conservative impulses, grounded in Durkheim's emphasis on ritual and Weber's emphasis on mystery in religion, have inclined sociologists repeatedly to question the replacement of religious by naturalistic assumptions. Some examples of this, among many, are Niklas Luhmann's critique of the loss of belief in heaven and hell; Peter Berger's critiques of liberal theological pretensions; Bryan Turner's anthropological defense of the Tridentine Mass; and Finke and Stark's recent rejection of the secularization thesis due to the vitality of countercultural religion, including Catholic orthodox dioceses and religious orders. Today the critical apparatus of sociology, once formidable in exposing the social construction of traditional belief, is increasingly being turned to exposing the social constructions of postmodernism—including those of sociology itself, an analysis known as "reflexivity". Dispassionate empirical analysis by sociologists is increasingly making evident the destructiveness and disorder of a social life built on naturalistic premises. It is no longer rare to hear noted the discrepancy between the current valorization of secularism and sociology's beginnings in a context of moral reform and deeply concerned with religion.

In the context of a more adequate theology, the Church has often recognized that sociology has much to offer both the propagation and pursuit of truth. In the founding period it was largely ultramontane Catholics, energized by the new papal social teaching and its call for limitation of property rights in accord with the common good, that embraced sociology in opposition to American liberals, who defended individualism and dissent. The Church's magisterium in turn claimed a special ownership of the new discipline as an instrument for validating Catholic truth. A 1902 Vatican document acclaimed: "Holy Church can rightly boast of having always been the patron of all those sociological studies (*tutti quigli studi di sociologia*) which some would present in the light of a new discovery." (Instruzione della Sacra Congregazione degli Affari Ecclesiastici Straordinari sull' Azione popolare cristiana o democratico-cristiana in Italia, *Acta Sanctae Sedis* XXXIV, 401-13. *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931) was even more effusive in its praise of sociology: "And so, with Leo's Encyclical pointing the way and furnishing the light, a true Catholic social science has arisen, which is daily fostered and enriched by the tireless efforts of those chosen men whom We have termed auxiliaries of the Church. They do not, indeed, allow their science to lie hidden behind learned walls . . . [but] bring their science out into the full light and stress of life. . . . Catholic principles on the social question have as a result, passed little by little into the patrimony of all human society" (20, 21).

Such broad approval did not persist with the rise of naturalism by the 1960s. Yet the Second Vatican Council (1963-65) did commend a limited, instrumental role for sociology as an adjunct to pastoral planning: "The forms of the apostolate should be properly adapted to current needs not only in terms of spiritual and moral conditions, but also of social, demographic, and economic ones. Religious and social surveys, made through offices of pastoral sociology, contribute greatly to the effective and fruitful attainment of that goal, and they are cordially recommended" (*Christus Dominus*, n. 17).

While the recent past has been a missed opportunity for Catholic sociology, there are clear signs of hope for the future. With the reassertion of Catholic orthodoxy that began with the pontificate of John Paul II (1979-?) has come vision and prospects for a renewed sociology operating in collaboration rather than competition with Catholic truth. A new generation of social scientists, ethicists and theologians, particularly in the United States and Britain, are rediscovering the vision of a faithful Catholic sociology. In 1994 the Society of Catholic Social Scientists was founded as an alternative to the secularized Association for the Sociology of Religion. The new scholarly society is devoted to "assist[ing] the Catholic Church in fulfilling her various apostolic efforts, and . . . bring[ing] the Church's social and other teaching and the Natural Law to bear on addressing the challenges and problems of modern culture."

In the vision of the Church, however, the relationship of sociology to theology is not simply that of minor to major premise. Sociological research pursued within the context of Catholic truth cannot be engaged in simply to communicate, confirm or apply established doctrine, but must also be oriented to seek and find truth on its own. This vision of science has been elegantly expressed by Pope John Paul II, who urges scientists "to continue their efforts without ever abandoning the *sapiential* horizon within which scientific and technological achievements are wedded to the philosophical and ethical values which are the distinctive and indelible mark of the human person. Scientists are well aware that "the search for truth, even when it concerns a finite reality of the world or of man, is never-ending, but always points beyond to something higher than the immediate object of study, to the questions which give access to Mystery" (*Fides et Ratio* 106).

Bibliography: This article is indebted to Flanagan, Kieran, *The Enchantment of Sociology* (St. Martin's Press, 1996) and Varacalli, Joseph, *Bright Promise, Failed Community* (Lexington Books, 2000). For an overview of sociology, see Collins, Randall, *Four Sociological Traditions* (Oxford University Press, 1994) and Ritzer, George, *Sociological Theory* (McGraw-Hill, any edition since 1996). For magisterial discussion of sociology, see the papal encyclicals *Quadragesimo Anno*, *Fides et Ratio*, and *Veritatis Splendor*.

See also: Ethics, Moral Theology, Catholic Social Teaching, Naturalism, Positivism, and articles on the other social sciences.

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