Unit Essay 1: Comte, Spencer, and Martineau

Samantha Cake

Department of Sociology, Longwood University

SOCL 401: Sociological Theory

Dr. Scott Grether

January 30, 2025

Unit Essay 1: Comte, Spencer, and Martineau

Summary of Revisions

Based on the feedback I was given for this essay, I identified and corrected a few issues pertaining to my adherence to APA format and my grammar. Firstly, I moved my reference page down so that it begins on its own page. Secondly, I added a running head with page numbers flush right. Thirdly, I moved my paper title down an extra line on my title page (now the title is three lines below the top margin of the paper). Lastly, I corrected my use of dates without author names in my in-text citations, and I corrected a few punctuation issues throughout the essay. I made these changes because the APA 7th style guide on Purdue Owl, a site that professors encourage students to use to gather accurate and up-to-date citation and formatting information, includes these formatting features for student papers.

What is sociological theory?

Sociological theories provide paradigms, or cognitive frameworks, that help us to explain and understand social phenomena that occur among and between multiple scales of human society (Grether, 2025a). Sociological theories seek to explain–not to predict–the social realities that we observe, experience, and/or study, and they are developed iteratively, through conversation and synthesis among knowledge producers across time and space (Grether, 2025a). Sociological theories, like any theory, are never definite–they can never be concretely proven, because societies are dynamic and our knowledge about them is constantly growing and evolving as they do.

What makes sociological theory unique from other scientific theories?

As defined by Edles and Appelrouth (2010), “theory is a system of generalized statements or propositions about phenomena.” According to these authors, the theories of the

natural sciences tend to serve two main purposes: 1) to explain and predict phenomena in question, and 2) to produce testable and falsifiable hypotheses (Edles & Appelrouth, 2010). Regardless of the discipline, theories should expand across time and space, they are developed through, and are ever-changing because of, constant dialogue among the minds of knowledge-producers, and they cannot be proven because of their dynamic, cumulative nature. As Sternheimer writes, understanding the roots of the theoretical conversations that have shaped a discipline over time provides students with a foundational understanding of that discipline's perspective, who has contributed, and how their contributions have impacted knowledge production (2018).

Sociological theory is distinct from the theories that frame the natural sciences in many regards; firstly because sociological theory is not predictive. The nature of human beings is not the product of any one principle–humans are motivated to act on an array of complex, often simultaneous social and psychological forces (Grether, 2025a). This critical departure from rational, predictive subject matter necessitates that sociological theories develop through more flexible, story-like narratives that are informed by personal experiences, existing knowledge, and new observations that extend, modify, and/or refute old theories with new data (Grether, 2025a). Additionally, because sociological theory is often rooted in implicit moral assumptions that contrast traditional notions of "scientific objectivity", it tends to be more evaluative and critical than theories of the natural sciences (Edles & Appelrouth, 2010). The work of the core, classical sociologists that I discuss below was shaped importantly by their own moral sensibilities about the creation of modern societies (Edles & Appelrouth, 2010).

Early and Influential Contributors to Sociology

Auguste Comte

Since the dawn of human existence, people have been interacting, forming and dissolving communities, gathering resources for themselves and others, practicing both domination and resistance, and creating systems that organize their values and beliefs. We have Auguste Comte (1798-1857) to thank for coining the term that describes the study of such human dynamics–sociology (or, as he first iterated it, social physics) (Allan & Daynes, 2017). Comte contributed significantly to the establishment of sociology as a legitimate science. He believed that sociology was a "keystone" discipline in the scientific community because it was the last positivistic science to develop out of other sciences; and thus, it could encompass the theories and subject matter of the other sciences (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

Today, Comte is widely recognized for his positivist theoretical approach to sociology and for the Law of Three Stages–the framework he created to organize his ideas about the evolution of human society. Comte's positivism is defined by his belief that sociologists should seek to rationally and empirically uncover the laws of the social world using lessons and procedures from the natural sciences (Grether, 2025b). He was convinced that there exist universal laws that explain and govern all human behavior, and that the only way to uncover these laws is by objectively observing, measuring, deducing, or deriving knowledge about society from mathematical or scientific influence (Grether, 2025b).

Comte's Law of Three Stages is a macro-level theory that details a "fixed series of successive transformations" that advance human societies (Comte, 1875). The Theological Stage is Comte's starting point, in which members of a society believe that divine forces cause and create all observable phenomena (Grether, 2025b). He associated this stage with the period

prior to the 1300s, in which humans lacked scientific knowledge to otherwise explain what they observed (Grether, 2025b). As a result, they posed existential questions and sought "absolute knowledge" that developed a belief and reliance on the supernatural (Grether, 2025b). The second stage is the metaphysical, which begins during the Middle ages and Renaissance (Grether, 2025b). The metaphysical stage is characterized by a transition from belief in the supernatural to a belief in the "abstract". Skepticism arises when community members begin to notice "facts" that cannot be explained by divine forces, which prompts them to question popular beliefs (Grether, 2025b). The last stage is the scientific or positivist stage, in which people start to fully rely on what they can observe and prove for themselves with facts and hard data (Grether, 2025b). The positivist stage is marked by a total abandonment of supernatural or abstract forces, and an acceptance of the power of natural and social forces. Laws, science, and rational thought become the dominant means of inquiry and explanation (Grether, 2025b). In theory, this stage is where our society currently stands.

Comte's Law of Three Stages uses the early methodological framework he outlined in his "Methods of Inquiry". Comte's methods prize four main strategies: observation, experimentation, comparison, and historical method (Grether, 2025b). He believed that researchers must make observations about society and people to understand social dynamics (changing forces in society that allow them to progress) and social statics (stable forces or phenomena that create stability, order, and predictability) (Grether, 2025b). He also asserted that sociologists must test their ideas and use comparisons between societies and across time to reveal dynamics, statics, and natural laws (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

Herbert Spencer

Our contemporary understandings of evolutionary theory and functionalism are owed greatly to the work of Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Spencer is credited as the first intellectual to see and explain society in a way that we now associate with the science of Sociology (Allan & Daynes, 2017). He was also the first to view human society as a large-scale system of interrelated parts that change and function over time as the society develops (Allan & Daynes, 2017). He compared society to an organism, and its social institutions to organs. In order for the larger society to function, each of its specialized components need to be able to perform their task. The organismic analogy represents the basic ideas behind functionalism–society is like a body, with requisite needs; it has specialized, differentiated, and integrated parts; and its goal is to maintain system equilibrium (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

Spencer was deeply influenced by Darwin's *Origin of Species*, and he–not Darwin–coined the phrase, "survival of the fittest" to explain why some organisms thrive while others in the same species do not (Grether, 2025b). He *is* credited, however, with infamously applying Darwin's theory of evolution to human society, thus creating "Social Darwinism," or the idea that the principles of evolution and natural selection apply to individuals, social classes, and human societies (Acton, 2024). He believed that the British Empire, which was at its colonial peak during his lifetime, was the "pinnacle of social evolution" and that capitalism and Britain's Industrial Revolution evidenced this idea of superiority (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

Spencer believed that all societies evolve through a three-phase process: growth, structure, and differentiation (Grether, 2025b). At first, he believed that social evolution could only occur unilinearly, but as he continued to study society over the course of his life his observations prompted him to accept that social evolution can move in both directions: towards

"development" and away from it (Grether, 2025b). He believed that evolution begins when societies start growing, either by an increase in population or through the integration of previously separate social groups (Grether, 2025b). He believed that population expansion would necessitate changes in the distribution of resources and the nature of material and non-material conditions (Grether, 2025b). Next, he believed that societies moved on to the structural phase, in which social structures (such as law, social institutions, and social groups) have to adapt to meet the needs of their ever-changing demographic to remain viable (Grether, 2025b). Spencer also believed that every society must develop a strong, stable, central regulation system to protect its members from "enemies and prey" (Grether, 2025b). The last phase of social evolution for Spencer was differentiation, in which "differentiated states" begin to form within the increasingly heterogeneous, mutually dependent society. Although a differentiated society consists of a complex web of individual States, these States still provide mutual aid to one another and operate under the same central regulating system (Grether, 2025b).

Whether Spencer considered a society to be militant or industrial depended on its central regulation system–if the primary regulatory body in a society engages in aggressive and protective behavior, especially for defense against "the enemy", it is militant (Allan & Daynes, 2017; Grether, 2025b). If the society is primarily regulated by the economy, especially that which promotes free trade, innovation, economic association, and profit motivation, it is industrial (Allan & Daynes, 2017). Spencer believed that all societies start out as militant, but after standing armies and taxes are established the pathway to industrialism becomes more functional, and most societies tend to trend towards industrialism in the long run. However, regression is possible–societies that became industrialized can move back into militance (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

Harriet Martineau

Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) was a general theorist concerned with gender as a crucial part of the processes of modernity and nation-building (Allan & Daynes, 2017). Most of her work is focused on understanding how democracy progresses, particularly with regards to how democracies maintain their moral and ethical base (Edles & Appelrouth, 2010). She took particular interest in the United States because of the glaring contradiction between the institution of slavery and "the principles on which [the United States] is professedly founded", such as the clause that "all men are created equal" and the supposedly unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Allan & Daynes, 2017). She held American institutions, practices, ideologies, and values to a standard that could not be disputed–the standard set in our own founding documents (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

Martineau is recognized for translating Auguste Comte's *Positive Philosophy* from French to English, and for publishing one of the first methodological accounts of sociology (Grether, 2025b). She did so with the goal of creating an accessible framework that any citizen could use to make informed, scientific observations about society, because she believed that doing so is part of being a responsible citizen (Allan & Daynes, 2017). She felt that important knowledge about the morals and manners of a society–the keys to its ethical base–could be produced by critically observing the "things", or aspects of material culture, alongside "discourse of persons", such as interactions, common language use, and communication styles (Grether, 2025b).

For Martineau, a society's distinguished configuration of Morals and Manners were the subject matter of sociological inquiry (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007). As articulated by Lengermann & Niebrugge (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007), Martineau's conception of Morals

are "[...] a society's collective ideas of prescribed and proscribed behavior," and Manners are, "[...] the patterns of action and association in society," (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007). In other words, Morals are "virtues" or "principles" that reflect the "common mind" of actors within a society; they can be both visible or invisible, and they compel people to behave in specific ways in particular circumstances (Grether, 2025b). Manners, then, reveal people's underlying moral views based on the way that they behave (Grether, 2025b).

An important part of Martineau's methodology was the process of "preparing the observer" to conduct social inquiry. She considered the human mind as the "instrument of observation," and she understood that personal biases–implicit or explicit–could greatly influence the outcomes of research (Allan & Daynes, 2017). Martineau split researcher preparation into three main areas: philosophical (figuring out the subject of study), moral (the observer should know themselves well enough to predict what might make them prejudiced, and they should plan ahead to quell or navigate that prejudice), and learning how to safeguard observations against their own premature assumptions (Allan & Daynes, 2017). Thus, the triage of impartiality, critique, and sympathy were key components that Martineau used to convey the researcher's role in her methodological framework. Impartiality refers to the abandonment of ethnocentrism, the embrace of cultural relativism, and the exclusion of prejudice (Grether, 2025b). Critiquing meant assessing the level of discrepancy or agreement between the manners and morals observed, and what happens as a result of that relationship. Sympathy refers to stepping into the shoes of the participant to try to understand the world from their point of view (Grether, 2025b).

Martineau was also what we could consider today to be a feminist. She believed sociology to be "a critical science with an ethical imperative to oppose domination," including

the domination of women by men, of People of Color by White people, of the working class by the elite, etc. (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007). She believed that domination occurs both structurally, in culture and institutions, and interactionally, when one individual (or group of individuals) oppresses the will of another (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007). Martineau considered domination to be antithetical to the promise of sociology, and she articulated that to dominate someone is to deny them the right to act as a moral being (Grether, 2025b). She also argued that women's positionality in society gives them a gendered standpoint that is useful for conducting research–she believed that the truest measure of democracy in a society is the "happiness of those it excludes–in this case, women." (Allan & Daynes, 2017). She focused much of her analysis of democracy on the institutions of the home and the family, because those were the spheres where women were most likely to live and work and because Morals and Manners were first socialized there for children (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007).

References

Acton, H. Burrows (2024, December 5). *Herbert Spencer*. Encyclopedia Britannica. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Herbert-Spencer.

Allan, K., & Daynes, S. (2017). *Explorations in classical sociological theory : seeing the social world* (Fourth edition). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506357331.

Comte, A. (1875). *System of Positive Polity* (Vol. 2). Longman's, Green, and co.

Edles, S., & Appelrouth, S. (2010). *Sociological Theory in the Classical Era: Text and Readings* (Third edition). Sage. ISBN: 9781452203614.

Grether, S. T. (2025a). *What is theory, why is it important* [PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from Lecture Notes Online Website: https://longwood.instructure.com/courses/1316404/pages/lectures.

Grether, S. T. (2025b). *Comte, Martineau, Spencer*.[PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from Lecture Notes Online Website: https://longwood.instructure.com/courses/1316404/pages/lectures.

Lengermann, P. M., & Niebrugge, G. (2007). Marianne Weber (1870-1954)–A Woman-Centered Sociology. In *The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory 1830-1930* (pp. 193-214). Waveland Press. ISBN-10: 1577665090.

Sternheimer, K. (2018, January 18). *Joining the Conversation: Why Study Theory.* Everyday Sociology Blog. https://www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2018/01/joining-the-conversation-why-study-theory.html

Unit Essay 2: Émile Durkheim

Samantha Cake

Department of Sociology, Longwood University

SOCL 401: Sociological Theory

Dr. Scott Grether

March 19, 2025

Unit Essay 2: Émile Durkheim

Summary of Revisions

Based on the feedback I was given for this essay, I identified and corrected two issues pertaining to my adherence to APA format. Initially, I failed to include a running head with page numbers flush right. I've added this to the revised version. I also corrected my use of dates without author names in my in-text citations. I have amended these areas in my revised essay because the APA 7th style guide on Purdue Owl, a site that professors encourage students to use to gather accurate and up-to-date citation and formatting information, includes these formatting features for student papers.

1. What were the major concerns of this theorist? In other words, what were the questions, social issues, or sociological puzzles which appeared to motivate their theoretical interests?

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), was an esteemed French sociologist. Regarded as the father of Sociology, he was concerned with establishing sociology as a scientific field of study that avoids reductionism and considers social phenomena *sui generis*–as unique components that compose society (Grether, 2025). As a positivist, he wanted to establish a framework that would help researchers discover "social facts," the unit of empirical sociological analysis that he created and staunchly advocated for (Grether, 2025). He believed that social facts act as natural laws that govern all social behavior, beyond the control of any one individual (Grether, 2025).

Durkheim was also particularly concerned with the issues of modernity, development, the division of labor, specialization, suicide, religion, and solidarity in communities. Durkheim wanted to know how modernity was affecting/would continue to affect the moral and ethical foundation of society, which he believed to be primarily responsible for holding societies together (Grether, 2025). He was concerned that society's moral base, and thus its structural

integrity, was diminishing as industrialization, differentiation, and division of labor increased (Grether, 2025). He also wanted to understand how religion contributes to the moral foundation of a given society–he aimed to identify the empirical elements present in all religions to understand how they helped shape the organization and collective consciousness of their respective societies (Grether, 2025).

The socio-political climate and region in which Durkheim grew up greatly influenced his sociological perspective and interests. He was born into a Jewish family with a long legacy of Rabbis shortly after rapid industrialization and railroad expansion took off in France, which quickly altered the organization of French society. As a young intellectual, he noticed that production had become more specialized, interconnected, and interdependent than ever before–a realization that served as the foundation for his functionalist ideas. Durkheim also observed how the expedited transportation of goods, people, and ideas within and across international borders expanded commerce and communication and increased innovatory pressure (Grether, 2025). He remained interested in how religion impacts social organization, and his personal doctrine shifted from Judaisim to Catholicism to Agnosticism over the course of his life (Grether, 2025). In the 1880s Durkheim watched the French public education system transition from a religious to a secular model, signifying a massive ideological shift towards empowering citizens to think independently from the church. These socio-historical dynamics help explain why Durkheim was so interested in the concept of modernity and how increasing structural and social differentiation impacts society and people's daily lives (Grether, 2025).

2. What are their key theoretical contributions? Make sure to explain what these contributions are in your own words.

Durkheim believed that social facts organize social life. Social facts are Durkheim's unit of empirical sociological analysis–they are social phenomena that we can easily recognize, that we can measure, and that have an independent existence that is greater and more objective than that of any individual (Grether, 2025). Allan and Daynes define social facts as "the factual or objective existence of social structures and processes." (2017). Durkheim believed that social facts govern all social life, and that individuals are unknowingly coerced and controlled by such facts. Thus, he believed that if sociologists could define social facts, they would be able to explain any and all social behavior.

Durkheim is also known for greatly refining the functionalist perspective–an instrumental sociological framework to which he made key theoretical contributions. The essence of functionalism is the idea that society functions as a system of interrelated structures that constantly evolve, adapt, and complexify over time (Grether, 2025). Durkheim drew greatly from Herbert Spencers' theory that society is similar to an organism in that 1) its separate parts are integrated as a result of their interdependence, and 2) that society must perform requisite functions in order to survive (Allan & Daynes, 2017). However, Durkheim thought it necessary to add the concept of collective consciousness to the list of functions needed for the survival of society. Collective consciousness can be explained as the shared values, beliefs, sentiments, behaviors, and perspectives of a community, as well as the power of a shared culture to guide individuals to possess common values and beliefs; to prescribe and prohibit specific behavior ubiquitously in a society (Allan & Daynes, 2017). Additionally, Durkheim disagreed with Spencer that increasing standardized regulations in a society would address problems of

coordination and control (Grether, 2025). Instead, Durkheim argued that society needs collective consciousness and the space to develop structural and social differentiation to survive and flourish. Thus, he added “collective consciousness” to Spencer’s list of requisite needs (Grether, 2025).

Durkheim believed that collective consciousness was produced by social solidarity, a phenomenon that can be explained as the level of integration in a society (Allan & Daynes, 2017). He believed that two kinds of social solidarity can produce collective consciousness–organic solidarity and mechanical solidarity. Mechanical solidarity existed and continues to exist in traditional, agrarian societies (and on the Appalachian Trail!) where actors’ roles strongly resemble one another (Cake & Pederson, 2024). There is little-to-no division of labor, and the presence of a strong common cultural identity means that actors widely share the same values, beliefs, and traditions. The fact that actors’ lives and ideologies resemble each other closely brings the community together, and creates a sense of collective consciousness. Organic solidarity is most often associated with industrialized societies where there is a significant division of labor and where labor is highly specialized. Organic solidarity exists because in these societies, actors depend on one another to produce a complete product–they are interrelated as a result of their interdependence, which brings them together in the production process. This interdependence also creates collective consciousness, though in a vastly different way than mechanical solidarity.

Anomie arises when collective consciousness has been greatly disrupted and weakened in a society. Anomie is characterized by circumstances in which cultural codes are in disarray, social prescriptions are not effectively internalized, and the realistic limits of a balanced society seemingly disappear, leading to what Dr. Bart van Heerikhuizen of the University of Amsterdam

calls “dissatisfaction beyond repair.” (2015a). When a society enters an anomic state, the impacts are chaotic and devastating–as shown in his famous study *Suicide* (1897), anomic conditions created by economic uncertainty can lead to a spike in suicide rates among those who are most economically vulnerable and those who experience a drastic change in their economic circumstances in a relatively short time (Heerikhuizen, 2015a). His study *Suicide* also details fatalistic, egoistic, and altruistic suicide, which are different typologies of suicide that arise due to weaknesses in the robustness of social network, socio-economic instability, and low regulation (Heerikhuizen, 2015a).

Throughout his life, Durkheim also took great interest in, and devoted much time and energy to studying, the role of religion in society. He believed that religion functionally increases social cohesion and produces collective effervescence, a sensation of shared euphoria that comes from performing shared rituals (Heerikhuizen, 2015b). He also asserted that religion can serve as a powerful preventative cure for egoism and anomie in times of uncertainty (Heerikhuizen, 2015b). He believed that even as religion became less prominent in modernity (i.e France shifting from religious to secular education), human beings would continue to create new institutions that fulfill the same important cohesive and organizational functions as traditional religions of the past (Heerikhuizen, 2015b).

3. **How are their theoretical contributions still relevant in studying and understanding society today? When addressing this part of the question, make sure to include one or two examples to support your position.**

Durkheim’s theoretical contributions remain relevant in the sociological pursuit of studying and making sense of society today. In a world characterized by an ever-increasing division of labor due to rapid advances in technology and globalization, as well as by extreme

political polarization, understanding Durkheim's concepts of social solidarity and collective consciousness helps to explain how and why the expansion of capitalism has exacerbated anomie and weakened social cohesion in societies around the world. While organic solidarity exists in capitalist societies, the unpredictable economic conditions associated with capitalism create a sense of anomie and disrupt social relations. For example, economic experts have published predictions that the Trump administration is probably going to send the U.S into another economic recession this year (Schneid, 2025). The fear of economic downturn and increased inflation has created anxiety and difficulty planning for the future among Americans (Schneid, 2025; Hsu, 2025).

Additionally, sociological articles have used Durkheim's theory that religion supports collective consciousness to reveal that the white Christian nationalist community that vocally supports Trump's fascist policies are not traditional church-goers (Enos, 2021). Instead, these nationalists practice their religion independently, separated from a regular worship community and traditional shared rituals (Enos, 2021). This isolation explains why white Christian nationalism has *weakened* collective consciousness in the U.S (Enos, 2021). Additionally, journalist Karen Sternheimer reported that mechanical solidarity was present among members of the House and Senate during and after the January 6 insurrection (2021). Officials were brought together by the experience of sheltering in place, and the shared emotions of fear, sadness, and anger that the insurrection sparked helped remind officials across party lines of their common values of democracy and a peaceful transition of power (Sternheimer, 2021).

References

Allan, K., & Daynes, S. (2017). *Explorations in classical sociological theory : seeing the social world* (Fourth edition). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506357331.

Cake, S. B., & Pederson, J. (2024). 'Kinship like I've never experienced before': Modern mechanical solidarity on the Appalachian trail network. *Social Sciences and Humanities Open, 10*(101,109). doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2024.101109.

Enos, J. (2021, June 7). *The Power of Religion: Christian Nationalism and Trump Support*. Everyday Sociology. www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2021/06/the-power-of-religion-christian-nationalism-and-trump-support.html.

Grether, S. T. (2025). *Durkheim* [PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from Lecture Notes Online Website: longwood.instructure.com/courses/1316404/pages/lectures.

Heerikuizen, B. V. [Social Sciences - UVA]. (2015a, August 4). *6.6 Anomic and Fatalistic Suicide* [Video]. YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qpc30S4bpEo&list=PLdqh3iVhzW1RP4qhVmDOEFLPUt8SUNZsu&index=6.

Heerikuizen, B. V. [Social Sciences - UVA]. (2015b, August 4). *6.8 The Social Functions of Religion* [Video]. YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=DgpR1hj4_9o&list=PLdqh3iVhzW1RP4qhVmDOEFLPUt8SUNZsu&index=8

Hsu, J. (2025, March). *Surveys of Consumers: Preliminary Results for March 2025*. University of Michigan. www.sca.isr.umich.edu/.

Schneid, R. (2025, March 16). Is the U.S Heading Into a Recession Under Trump? Here's What to Know. *Time*. time.com/7265290/is-the-us-heading-into-a-recession-under-trump-what-to-know/.

Sternheimer, K. (2021, January 8). *Come Together: Applying Durkheim's Ideas to the Capitol Siege*. Everyday Sociology. www.everydaysociologyblog.com/2021/01/come-together-applying-durkheims-ideas-to-the-capitol-siege.html.

Unit Essay 3 - Exploring Critical Theory and its Applications

Samantha Cake

Department of Sociology, Longwood University

SOCL 401: Sociological Theory

Dr. Scott Grether

April 22, 2025

Unit Essay 3 - Exploring Critical Theory and its Applications

Summary of Revisions

Based on the feedback I was given for this essay, I identified and corrected a few issues pertaining to my adherence to APA format and my grammar. Initially, I failed to include a running head with page numbers flush left. I've added this to the revised version. I also deleted one of the lines between my name and the paper title on the title page (there were two blank lines, now there is only one), and I corrected a citation on my reference page that was missing a comma at the end of the first author's initials. I have corrected these areas because the APA 7th style guide on Purdue Owl, a site that professors encourage students to use to gather accurate and up-to-date citation and formatting information, includes these formatting features for student papers.

What is the Purpose of Critical Theory?

Critical theory is a theoretical tradition that draws knowledge from, and spans across the disciplines of, sociology, philosophy, psychology, law, economics, and more. In essence, it focuses on where, to whom, and how power is concentrated in a specific society as a result of structural, cultural, and ideological forces; and it aims to use those insights to challenge social systems of domination by informing social action and inciting change (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). The major concerns of the critical theoretical tradition are as follows: 1) the pervasiveness of power structures in society, 2) social problems as the result of an extreme imbalance in who holds and maintains power in society, and 3) to identify, analyze, and challenge existing power structures in society (Grether, 2025a).

Because critical theory focuses on systems and power and domination that operate within the institutions and culture of a society, it became a crucial tool for members of marginalized

groups to identify *how* their marginalization operates in society and how it can be resisted. Thus, critical theory has supported and influenced the development of additional theoretical traditions with emancipatory goals, such as feminism, queer theory, critical race theory, and postcolonial/decolonial theory (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). Within these fields of study, critical theory has helped answer questions about why concentrated ownership of the means of production leads to domination, how the working class is prevented from developing class-consciousness, why women's economic dependence on men represents a power imbalance, how Black women are uniquely situated at a crossroads of systems of marginalization, the impacts of the historical exclusion of the LGBTQ+ community from emancipatory movements, and how colonial ideology continues to distort academic integrity (Celikates & Flynn, 2023).

Notable Theorists and their Critical Theoretical Contributions

Karl Marx is widely credited as having laid the primary theoretical foundation upon which critical theory was built. Marx's theoretical contributions, such as his analysis of capitalism as an inherently exploitative system that creates a distinct socioeconomic hierarchy in society, focused on identifying and analyzing the power structures built into the economic system of capitalism. A prime example of his critical theory in action is Marx's explanation of how the proletariat, or the working class, were forced to work in inhumane conditions for insufficient pay, as well as how the bourgeoisie, or the owning class, stifled the proletariat from developing class consciousness. The bourgeois kept the proletariat trapped in oppressive employment by preventing 1) "the subjective awareness that experiences of deprivation are determined by structured class relations and not individual talent", and 2) "the effort and group identity that come from such awareness." (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

W.E.B Du Bois is also credited as a foundational thinker who helped develop critical theory. As Edles & Appelrouth write, “Du Bois’s work is exemplary in that it illuminates the intertwined structural and subjective causes and consequences of class, race, and racism.” (2010). His theory of double consciousness, in which he asserts that the racial hierarchy in American society forces Black Americans to view their Blackness and their American-ness through two separate, conflicting lenses, draws attention to how power structures influence group identity (Grether, 2025a). Du Bois’s critique of race as an organizing principle of American life is a theme that runs throughout his work, and it was this concept that proved most influential to the later development of Critical Race Theory–a subsection of critical theory that focuses on how race and power interact in society (Grether, 2025a).

Critical theory cannot be discussed without some mention of the Frankfurt School–established in 1924, it was an institution for social research run by the group of intellectuals who are credited with officially establishing the critical theoretical tradition (Celikates & Flynn, 2023). Together, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, Eric Fromm, and Jürgen Habermas, set out to understand how fascist and authoritarian regimes–such as those of Stalin and Hitler–could rise to power out of modern, seemingly-democratic societies (Allan & Daynes, 2017). These men were motivated to understand how the socio-political changes they observed happening around them were being influenced by culture, such as why the Reich Ministry’s propaganda so effectively controlled people’s attitudes and behavior. Ultimately, the scholars of the Frankfurt School expanded Marx’s conception of ideology as being intimately linked to culture and knowledge production, and critical theory was born (Allan & Daynes, 2017).

Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper, two inspiring Black women from the 19th/20th century South, are also scholars who contributed greatly to the critical theoretical tradition. Ida B. Wells-Barnett, an investigative journalist, author, and activist, famously published *A Red Record* in 1895 (Grether, 2025b). In this book, Wells-Barnett brilliantly utilized statistics and reports of lynchings in White newspapers to aggregate data on every known lynching across America between 1892 and 1894 (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007a). Wells-Barnett's use of a critical lens is clearly demonstrated through her analysis of the alleged causes of lynchings at this time, particularly as those causes related to the "thread-bare lie" that Black men notoriously raped White women (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007a). Through her analysis of the media, historical evidence, and the complex ties between gender, race, class, and geography, Wells-Barnett concluded that the White media spread this lie because they needed to cover up the fact that White women were attracted to Black men (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007a). She understood the cultural power that the media had in shaping popular ideology and perpetuating racial violence, so she publicly denounced its deception and called attention to the racial power structures that encouraged the spread of dangerous racial stereotypes (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007a).

Anna Julia Cooper was another famous Black female scholar, author, activist, and educator whose sociological work analyzes social life in America with respect to how power and difference interact to create dominant or equalized relationships (Grether, 2025b). She devoted much of her life to analyzing how existing power structures across different areas of American society work together to oppress Black women, and she worked to prevent this oppression through teaching, authorship, public speaking, etc (Grether, 2025b). Cooper is well known for her analysis of how Jim Crow practices re-enforced the pre-Civil War power structure of White

domination and Black subordination in the Antebellum South, particularly at the complex intersections of race, gender, and class (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007a). For example, Cooper wrote and spoke about how the mass-incarceration and forced labor of Black male inmates literally put Black Americans back in chains, while the signage of segregation fragmented Black women's identities by forcing them to enter train cars for "Colored People" rather than those for "Ladies" (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007a).

Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jane Addams, two 19th/20th century White female intellectuals, authors, and activists, are notable contributors to the critical theoretical tradition, as well. Gilman's theory of "sexuo-economic relations," which details the socio-economic implications of the relationship between gender and work in a patriarchal society, was crucial to her critical theoretical understanding of gender as "the basic arrangement of inequality in a society." (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007b). In sexuo-economic relations, the social structure of the economy and the private sphere of our sexual relationships overlap to create a situation in which women are economically dependent on men, and this power imbalance creates opportunities for household corruption and domestic abuse (Allan & Daynes, 2017; Grether, 2025c). Here, Gilman interprets American culture and institutions as working together to create a system of oppression for women.

Jane Addams, the first American woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1931 and the founder of Chicago's Hull House, was a firm believer in and practitioner of ameliorative social progress. As Lengermann & Niebrugge write, "For Addams, the work of the sociologist is to analyze the situation-at-hand [the lived experience of individual actors] in order to bring about ameliorative social change in the world in which the situation occurs." (2007c). To do this, she told and created her social theory through narrative–an unusual choice that allowed her to ground

her representation of social life in "the historical experiences of individual people in interaction with each other in real places at real times." (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007c). She almost always centered the voice of a woman in her work, so as to illuminate the power structures that shaped different aspects of feminine experiences in the States at this time (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007c). She embraced conflicting vantage points in her narratives, and identified aspects of positionality such as race, class, and gender that complicated women's relationships with themselves and each other. These narratives point to the fact that larger structural inequalities in Chicago influenced community culture and women's interpersonal relationships at this time (Lengermann & Niebrugge, 2007c).

References

Allan, K., & Daynes, S. (2017). *Explorations in classical sociological theory : seeing the social world* (Fourth edition). Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506357331.

Celikates, R., & Flynn, J. (2023, December 21). *Critical Theory (Frankfurt School)*. Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/critical-theory/#CritTheoVersTradTheo.

Edles, S., & Appelrouth, S. (2010). W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963). In *Sociological Theory in the Classical Era: Text and Readings* (pp. 325-369). Sage. https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X0803600208

Grether, S. T. (2025a). *W.E.B Du Bois*. [PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from Lecture Notes Online Website:. https://longwood.instructure.com/courses/1316404/pages/lectures.

Grether, S. T. (2025b). *Cooper & Wells-Barnett*. [PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from Lecture Notes Online Website: https://longwood.instructure.com/courses/1316404/pages/lectures.

Grether, S. T. (2025c). *Feminism*. [PowerPoint Slides]. Retrieved from Lecture Notes Online Website: https://longwood.instructure.com/courses/1316404/pages/lectures.

Lengermann, P. M., & Niebrugge, G. (2007a). Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964) and Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931) The Foundations of Black Feminist Sociology. In *The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory 1830-1930* (pp.149-176). Waveland Press. DOI:10.2307/2654603.

Lengermann, P. M., & Niebrugge, G. (2007b). Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935) Gender and Social Structure. In *The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory 1830-1930* (pp. 10–148). Waveland Press. DOI:10.2307/2654603.

Lengermann, P. M., & Niebrugge, G. (2007c). Jane Addams (1860-1935) Ethics and Society. In *The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory 1830-1930* (pp. 65-104). Waveland Press. DOI:10.2307/2654603.