

FEMINIST SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY

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Summary

In this chapter, we will examine the sociological and feminist foundations of feminist sociological theory. Feminists argue that that without gender as a central analytic category, social life—work, family, the economy, politics, education, religion—cannot be adequately studied. We will consider the way that sociology has been centered on the male, informed by male perspectives, and dominated by men until relatively recently. We will then take a brief glimpse at the feminist movements in Europe and North America and the way they may have affected the development of feminist sociological theory. At this point we will summarize European and English language feminist sociological theory in the early “Second Wave,” briefly examining how feminist sociologists go about studying social life, and how they explain gendered inequality. Finally, we will pay attention to the changing field of feminist sociological theory, with the contributions and transformations brought by postmodernism, the study of masculinities and sexuality, and transnational feminist scholars.

1. Introduction

Feminist sociological theory is both an academic and a political approach to the study of society. It is critical and didactic; it analyzes and informs. It is inseparable from method. Feminist sociology emerged as a response to the missing gender in classical sociology,

setting forth an agenda for academic and social change. Because feminism, as we shall see below, is interdisciplinary in nature, feminist sociological theory has pulled in observations and approaches from political science, literature, geography, anthropology, and probably most importantly, philosophy. It has been excluded and marginalized, and probably never really understood by most sociologists.

In this chapter, we will examine the sociological and feminist foundations of feminist sociological theory and its effect on the discipline of sociology. The starting point is a consideration of the way that sociology has been centered on the male, informed by male perspectives, and dominated by men until relatively recently. Although women have been active participants since its inception, their voices and perspectives were marginalized in the discipline during most of the 19th and 20th centuries. Feminists argue that that without gender as a central analytic category, social life—work, family, the economy, politics, education, religion—cannot be adequately studied.

Because feminist sociology has its roots in European and English language scholarship, most of our attention will be directed there, examining the scholarship that has uncovered the gendered basis of social institutions in western modernity. However, in the last few decades, sociologists and activists outside these areas have made considerable contributions to the subdiscipline, and in fact, have steered it in new directions, considerably expanding it beyond the narrow question of whether women are oppressed relative to men in modern society. Once open to the notion of re-centering the marginalized other, feminist sociology is now informed by the insights of women in the global south and east, reflexively responding to the contradictions and conflicts within and outside the subdiscipline.

One problem in thinking about feminist sociological theory is whether it is distinct from other sociological traditions, and should be considered separately, or whether the work of feminist sociologists should be included within the subdisciplines. For example, should feminist symbolic interactionists be thought of as primarily symbolic interactionists or as feminists? Do we talk about feminist sociology of organizations as integrated into the larger subdiscipline of organizations or combined with their sisters in, for example, feminist welfare state studies?

Similarly, how do we define feminism? From an historical perspective, can one call a woman writing about women a feminist, if she did not use the term? What about women writing about men? Can men be feminist?

The definition of feminism has expanded from an early notion of simply challenging women's subordination to men and arguing for their equal rights, to seeing and understanding the social world from the vantage points of women, to changing systems of oppression based on western masculinist relations of ruling. And the definition of feminism is always changing, never static, never unitary, always subject to the specific understandings of the theorist. At the same time, there is a constant effort to find unity in the differences, a unity that can encompass all people who are affected by gender regimes, however they are manifested. It is the work of the feminist sociological theorist to grapple with these contradictions.

Our first task in this chapter is to look at the missing gender(s) in classical European and North American sociology, while also bringing in forgotten women of classical sociology, including Harriet Martineau, Marianne Weber, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Alexandra Kollontai, Anna Julia Cooper, and Jane Addams. We will then take a brief glimpse at the feminist movements in Europe and North America and the way they may have affected the development of feminist sociological theory. At this point we will summarize European and English language feminist sociological theory in the early “Second Wave”. We will briefly examine how feminist sociologists go about studying social life, and how they explain gendered inequality. Finally, we will pay attention to the changing field of feminist sociological theory, with the contributions and changes brought by postmodernism, the study of masculinities and sexuality, and transnational feminist scholars.

2. Classical Sociology

In the writings about women, sex, and gender in the “classical era,” for the writers typically thought to be the “fathers” of sociology—Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel—women were either almost completely ignored, or briefly discussed and then dismissed, or located within specific social locations such as the family. Drawing from and reinforcing the 19th century doctrine of two spheres, with woman as the private reproductive “body”, taking care of the home and hearth, and man as the public rational, political, and noble “mind” living in the larger world of commerce and politics, Auguste Comte argued that women’s mission was to humanize men, who were alienated and sexually unstable. For Comte, marriage was the positivist discipline of the undisciplined, for which it was necessary for the feminine to be subordinated to the masculine, proving that “equality of the sexes, of which so much is said, is incompatible with all social existence”.

For Durkheim, too, women were needed to control the passions of men, and the site for this was the family. Paradoxically, Durkheim saw women as “more primitive” but also necessary for their civilizing and stabilizing effect on men. For men, suicide rates were higher among the unmarried, while it was the married woman, over her unmarried sister, who was more likely to kill herself. Durkheim asked, “Must one of the sexes necessarily be sacrificed, and is the solution only to choose the lesser of the two evils.” Apparently so. Similarly, Simmel saw woman as undifferentiated, unified, “at home” within herself, but man was differentiated, because of the division of labor, and his “home” was beyond himself, resulting in a dualistic nature for men, but not for women. In order to solve that split, men had to live more creatively than women.

Max Weber’s view of women was more complex, perhaps because of his marriage to the social theorist Marianne Weber. His understanding of the role of women was grounded in his theories of rationalization: Rationalization and secularization displace the older social hierarchies. Far from idealizing the public/private split, Weber both critiqued the older patriarchal household, where women were subordinated to men, and analyzed the changed domestic relations attendant upon the modern rationalization process, replacing status with contract. Thus Weber believed that women’s status as oppressed member of a patriarchal household is replaced by her lower bargaining power in the contractual marriage, but this reduced power is due mostly to the remnant of the

old patriarchal system, although he was not immune from the current thinking that men were both physically and intellectually stronger than women.

But how did Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber become the personification of classical sociology? R.W. Connell suggests that the “fathers” of “classical” sociology were not really “classical” until Talcott Parsons and other mid-20th century sociologists made them so. The contributions of the women were pointedly ignored. Nowhere is this elision more poignant than in the case of Harriet Martineau, who not only translated August Comte’s *Positive Philosophy*, but made it readable through her editing and condensation. In fact, Martineau’s own sociological works, *Society in America* and *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, predated Comte’s by two decades.

Furthermore, late 19th and early 20th century sociological theory was far less systemized than it would become later in the century, with much of the emphasis on a colonialist project, according to Connell. Positivism, with its emphasis on value-neutral theory-testing, was not the only approach to social knowledge in the classical era. In fact, feminist sociologists proposed a different approach to sociology, but until relatively recently their contributions were largely submerged. Theories about and by women are in a constant state of rediscovery, as women have lacked control over the institutionalized knowledge about them. Thus, there is amnesia or active erasure of the scholarly work of feminists, and each generation must continually reinvent the discipline and rediscover forgotten thinkers.

These forgotten sociologists were more likely to think of sociology in terms of its applicability toward ameliorating the social ills of the day. Far from “value-free,” they saw the purpose of sociology as fostering the social values of equality and dignity for all. In England, Beatrice Potter Webb (1858-1943) was the co-author, along with her husband Sidney Webb, of various works that formed the conceptual basis for the British welfare state that emerged after World War I. Marianne Weber (1870-1954), a German, was married to Max Weber, and was a feminist sociologist-activist in her own right, writing nine books, including *Marriage, Motherhood, and the Law*, in which she studied the extent to which the change in society’s rationality from tradition to modernity altered the legal position of women. She served as one of the first elected German women in a state assembly and the president of the Federation of German Women's Organizations. In Russia, Alexandra Kollontai (1872-1952) was a leading intellectual in the Bolshevik Revolution, and one of the few who insisted on paying attention to the situation of women; she later was virtually exiled to work as an ambassador to Norway, Mexico, and Sweden. Ellen Key (1849-1926) was a Swedish social theorist who advocated a maternalist approach to women’s equality, suffrage, children’s education, and peace. Her writings were influential beyond Scandinavia, with interest in her work as far away as the United States and Japan.

In the United States, Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935), Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931), Anna Julia Cooper (1858-1964), Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954), Sophonisba Breckinridge (1886-1948), Jane Addams (1860-1935), Florence Kelley (1859-1932), Edith Abbott (1876-1957), and Grace Abbott (1878-1939) all worked to combine intellectual sociological endeavors with public service to advance the interests of women and other marginalized and oppressed people, notably immigrants and

African Americans. Gilman was a leading intellectual, publishing over 2000 articles, poems, and fiction, as well as six works of social theory and her widely read *Women and Economics* (1908). She had a radical vision of completely changing men's and women's roles, the structure and purpose of the family, the economic system, and the system of governance to advance women's economic independence and political power, although she, like the birth control advocate Margaret Sanger are thought to be either strong proponents of eugenics or used it to bolster their arguments. The African American Wells-Barnett wrote analyses of lynching and, along with Florence Kelley, helped to found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and developed a sociologically based conflict approach to understanding race relations. Both Wells-Barnett and Anna Julia Cooper worked with the Black male sociologist, W.E.B. DuBois. Jane Addams, an active member of the American Sociological Society, formulated her social theory in eight books and 200 articles, and founded the Hull House in Chicago, an important fixture in the settlement movement. Breckinridge, Kelley, and the Abbott sisters were involved with both the settlement movement and the Chicago School of Sociology, where they actively combined sociological theory construction, analysis, and social activism.

Neither feminists nor feminist sociologists, however, were unified in their understanding of what it meant to advance the interests of women. Even the origin of the term "feminism" is in dispute, but it is known that among the first self-named "feminists" the French women's suffragist Hubertine Auclert, who used the term to describe herself, and the organizers and participants of the "feminist" congress in Paris in May 1892. The term quickly spread to Europe and to the United States at the turn of the century. The term has never been free from controversy, both within and without the feminist movements. It is similarly difficult to determine whether to give the name of "feminist" to a female activist who is concerned about women's issues if she does not use the term herself.

Defining feminism has always been a tricky undertaking. Generally speaking, it means advocating on behalf of women and taking gender as a central category of analysis. But defining women's issues and what will benefit women, and which women, has always been problematic. The feminist historian Karen Offen notes that there were many different sorts of self-defined feminists in France at the turn of the century: "familial feminists," "integral feminists," "Christian feminists," "socialist feminists," "radical feminists," and "male feminists," among others.

Scholars of feminism have frequently argued that in the early 20th century, there were two major strands of feminist activism—those feminists who emphasized women's economic independence, such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Marianne Weber, and Alexandra Kollontai, and those with a more maternalist bent, exemplified by Ellen Key—and these two strands informed the sociological analyses and policy outcomes urged by their proponents. For women's economic independence to become a reality, women needed to be active participants in the wage economy, and arrangements for childcare and birth control were uppermost in the minds of the activist-scholars, while maternalist feminism focused on women's nurturing and relational characteristics, and argued for social policies that allowed women to remain home with their children or occupations that made the most of what was seen as women's natural caring personality.

3. Feminism and Feminist Sociology in the Post-War Era

During the Great Depression, feminists redirected their considerable skills to helping to create social programs and policies that would alleviate the hardships brought by massive unemployment and low wages. There was less academic theorizing, and more applied work. It is during this time that the groundwork was laid for the beginnings of the Swedish welfare state with its Population Policies and the United States' Social Security Act, and in both countries, feminist sociologies developed during the previous decades played an important role.

With the conclusion of the Second World War, feminism in the West appeared to be dead. Most European countries had granted suffrage to women in the interwar years, with the exception of Australia, New Zealand, Finland and Norway, where women achieved the vote before 1914, and France, Belgium, Italy, Romania, and Yugoslavia, where women had to wait until after the War (and in the case of Switzerland, not until 1971, and Liechtenstein, 1984). During and after the War, more pressing issues had taken center stage. In the countries immediately affected by warfare, rebuilding the country's infrastructure and populations were of vital concern, and in those spared war damage, the focus of most women was on family. The baby boom was in full swing in Western countries ushering in the housewife epoch, with its ideological emphasis on women's role as wife and mother, whether or not women were actually in the labor force. In those countries more heavily affected by the war women's roles were more complex, with the public sentiment of a need to return to "normalcy" and the ideal of the stay-at-home mother and wife, but complicated by a shortage of male workers in countries desperately in need of reconstruction.

During this period, Parsonian functionalism held sway in U.S. universities, and to a lesser extent in Europe. But whether functionalist or not, the dominant way of thinking about gender in post-war sociology was guided by the sex roles paradigm.

That did not mean, however, that women had ceased being active in the labor force or that feminist academic work had come to a standstill. The Swedish sociologist Alva Myrdal, who had been instrumental in crafting Sweden's response to its population decline during the Great Depression of the 1930s, paid particular attention toward facilitating women's combined roles as mother and worker, working in collaboration with the German sociologist, Viola Klein, in their book *Women's Two Roles*. In the United States, Russian Jewish immigrant Mirra Komarovsky battled the Parsonian hegemony, investigating the influence of gender expectations on middle class women and blue collar men.

In France, Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* in 1949, setting out an existentialist perspective on women: One is not born a woman; one becomes a woman. Although primarily a philosophical text, sociologists found her notion of woman as the "Other" enormously useful in adding depth and texture to their analyses, and providing a starting point for other feminists by suggesting feminism's two primary goals: (1) Women need to act as authentic subjects choosing their own histories and (2) society must be changed to make this possible.

4. Feminist Sociology in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s: “The Second Wave”

In the social ferment of the 1960s, feminism gained new life in the public consciousness. In the United States, it arose in the context of the Civil Rights Movement to secure citizenship rights to African Americans and other racial/ethnic minorities, the antinuclear and ecology movements, and the protests against the U.S. war in Vietnam, as women became conscious of the contradiction of working as subservient helpmeets to male leaders in liberation movements. The same was true in Australasia, which saw the rise of several movements for the rights of marginalized peoples—aboriginal, immigrant, gay and lesbian—including women. Similarly, in Sweden and Great Britain, where women’s issues were ignored by male labor leaders, the obvious lack of provisions for women’s work and participation—notably childcare, divorce, contraception, and laws against homosexuals—spurred women’s activism.

The baby boomers were coming of age. The mothers of the children born in the 1940s and 1950s were now free of childrearing duties and ready to claim an identity that went beyond wife and mother, and their daughters were putting off marriage and motherhood, and going to college at a rate that far exceeded any preceding generation.

In sociology, these new generations of feminists, reacting to the dominant functionalist sociologies of the 1950s, began what would become an arguably successful campaign to change the face of sociology. Women had been outsiders in sociology, as they had been in the rest of the academy, and even the knowledge system created by the dominant functionalist/positivist paradigm seemed to exclude women’s experiences. In fact, whenever women appeared at all in sociology, it was in the sociology of the family. Searching for a new way to understand the world, women turned to sources outside mainstream sociology for inspiration, Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan, in particular.

The feminist movement in sociology was shaped by the radical, socialist/marxist, and liberal feminisms of the day, and these, in turn, emerged from and critiqued the larger paradigms in which they were embedded. Liberal feminists, with strong roots in the classical liberal and pluralist traditions, argued for equal rights and a level playing field, and critiqued but did not reject institutions that tended to discriminate against women, explaining that with relatively minor reforms, women could achieve equality through their own efforts. Liberal feminist sociologists, then, stressed investigating barriers to equality and socialization into gender roles, and were more likely to argue that most differences between men and women were superficial at best.

Radical feminists, like others in the contemporary counter-cultural movement, tended to reject all institutions as oppressive, but unlike “hippies” and others who rejected the dominant society, saw sex oppression as the primary and most basic structure that led to all other oppressions and exploitation. Radical feminists, more than socialist or liberal feminists, were more likely to create organizations that excluded men. In response to patriarchy’s appropriation and exploitation of the female body, radical feminist sociologists focused their attentions on it, in particular, rape, incest, health care, and sexuality.

Marxist or socialist feminism arose within and as a critique of Marxism, and like Marxism, saw as the primary source of oppression an economic system that created systems of exploitation. Among socialist feminists, there was a real concern for race and class issues, including welfare rights. The primary debates within this approach were the relationships between, for example, sexism and racism, and patriarchy and capitalism. These sociologists investigated economics, labor markets, households, and the state.

Each of these perspectives also enriched the way we thought about “sex” and “gender.” In the 1950s and 1960s, most sociologists had thought in terms of “sex roles.” But this new generation of sociologists also thought about gender as an institution, an axis of stratification, and even as a performance. Even biological differences came to be seen as having an aspect of social construction.

As the century progressed, several broad issues captured the imagination of feminist scholars, primarily:

- How should women’s issues be investigated? Is there an unseen masculinity in sociological texts that implies that masculinity is the core category of the social? How does a feminist sociology understand society without seeing the world through a masculine eye?
- Are there gender differences, and if so, how do they arise? What creates the feminine and the masculine? Is it biology or something else?
- What is the extent and what are the causes of gender inequality? What forms does it take? Are differences in gender inequality affected by race/ethnicity, nationality, class, sexuality, age, and other factors? What are the effects?
- Returning to the questions asked by the feminist foremothers, how does change happen? What sort of change? What can today’s feminists do to address inequality and injustice?

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Biographical Sketch

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