

# 1 Introduction

## The complexity of sociology

### 1.0 Telling the Story of Sociology's Complexity

Deciding how to tell the story of western sociology and its complexity is not easy (Baehr 2002; Collins 1994; Coser 1977; Lepenies 1988; Merton 1968, 1996; Ritzer and Goodman 2004). One problem concerns the “nostalgia trap” of sociology—the tendency to conflate Merton’s distinction between the *history* and *systematics* of sociology (1968). History has to do with hermeneutics: “recovering” the meaning of the historical texts of sociology by reading them as they were intended, including the audience for which they were created and the social and material contexts in which they were situated (Merton 1968). Equally important, history concerns historiography: the method of getting the “history” of sociological texts correct, including the exact influence they had upon whom and why and to what extent (Jones 1983). In contrast, systematics has to do with exegesis: making use of historical texts by applying them to the present; that is, creatively reading and interpreting “texts” from the past in terms of the concerns and intentions of today. Systematics involves “creating” new links between the present and the past (Jones 1983, p. 447). Said another way, the “history” of sociology has to do with reading the past for its own sake, while systematics has to do with constructing a “history of the present” (See Foucault 1991, Chap. 1).

The nostalgic trap is the process of conflating exegesis with hermeneutics and historiography. In so doing, history falsely becomes the confused with creative links contemporary sociologists make with the past; not history as it actually happened.

Moving forward from Merton, the new historians of sociology (circa 1980s) refer to the nostalgic trap as *presentist* history, in contrast to their own approach, which they call *historicist* history. For the new historians, while historicists keep history and systematics separate, presentists fall into the nostalgic trap, treating exegesis as history (Jones 1983; Seidman 1985).

For the new historians, the nostalgic trap is a problem, in part, because it ignores the political, economic, cultural, disciplinary and academic (i.e., historical) realities in which the discipline of sociology emerged and developed; and because it gives a false impression of the role different scholars

and scholarly traditions have played in the progress of the discipline (See Connell 1997 and Jones 1983 for a review of this debate). For example, while Karl Marx is not a sociologist, his tremendous and continued influence on many sociologists renders his work, from a systematics perspective, “classic” and therefore part of the “cannon” of the discipline. From a historical perspective, however, Marx was not involved in the creation or development of sociology. Furthermore, most scholars writing under the disciplinary auspices or academic letters of “sociology” during the late 1800s and early 1900s did not treat Marx as a sociologist or his work a “classic.” Neither did many of them—particularly in the United States, where the discipline of sociology would primarily take shape—treat Weber or Durkheim with much admiration or awe (Jones 1983). In fact, as Connell explains:

Turn-of-the-century sociologists had no list of classics in the modern sense. Writers expounding the new science would commonly refer to Comte as the inventor of the term, to Charles Darwin as the key figure in the theory of evolution, and then to any of a wide range of figures in the intellectual landscape of evolutionary speculation (1997, p. 1513).

The other reason the nostalgic trap is a problem for historicists (and for Merton) is because it is so pervasive. As Jones (1983) and Connell (1997) explain, from Durkheim to Parsons to Giddens, the name of the historical game seems to be exegesis-as-history; or, as Merton states, “retrieving” past sociological texts for their use in the present (1968). Given the fame of the numerous presentists in sociology, their view has become—particularly since the 1920s—the standard account of the discipline. For example, as Connell points out, the majority of contemporary undergraduate and graduate textbooks in “English speaking” sociology consistently treat systematics as history (1997, pp. 1512–1515).

Because the nostalgic trap is an important issue in the historiography of sociology, we will keep the following five points in mind while telling our story of sociology’s complexity.

- First, we will remember that the term “sociology” refers to a somewhat heterogeneous and often times conflicting and discontinuous network of scholars, theories, concepts, methods, intellectual traditions, schools of thought and substantive topics generally associated with the study of society.

- Second, we will remember that different scholars gather, organize, center, marginalize and ignore aspects of this “sociology” in distinctive ways, each telling a somewhat unique “story” about the discipline based on the particular “history of the present” they seek to construct—think Michel Foucault (1977, 1980, 1987).
- Third, we will remember that the storyline of sociology is not necessarily linear, seamless, progressive, or continuous. In fact, in many ways it is filled with intellectual cul-de-sacs, “dead-ends,” breaks, retrogressions, tangents and, in some cases, unrecognized work. One example would be the continued marginalization of the works of W.E.B. Dubois and Jane Adams (Ritzer and Goodman 2004).
- Fourth, we will remember that there is no single sociology; instead, there are many. As Collins, for example, has made clear, the story of sociology in France is not the story of sociology in England; and the story of European conflict sociology is not the story of pragmatic sociology in the United States (Collins 1994).
- Finally, we will remember that, despite the nonlinear trajectory of sociology, and despite the different ways its stories can be told, there is a natural history to sociology and its various traditions, lineages, and so forth.

Reminding ourselves of these five points, however, will not keep us from exegesis. As Collins explains, while the new historians of sociology are correct to remedy the conflation of history and systematics, their remedy does not force one to avoid exegesis or its *integration* with hermeneutics. Even Merton makes this point. The history of sociology does not do away with exegesis. It makes exegesis better (1968, p. 33). In fact, despite the importance of hermeneutics and historiography (i.e., getting the past “right”), exegesis (i.e., reacquainting one’s self with the classics, See Merton 1968, p. 33) moves ideas forward. One looks to the past (even if it is the immediate past) to create a new storyline of the present—think Foucault (1977) and Randall Collins (1994).

Given these important points, we will use the genealogical methods of Foucault and Collins to tell our story of sociology’s complexity. While different in focus, both scholars combine hermeneutics, historiography and exegesis. First, Foucault, by placing great emphasis on the historical conditions of classic texts—that is, the relevant social practices in which they are situated, from the cultural to the institutional to the scientific—seeks to understand the past in terms of the concerns of the present (1977, 1987). Foucault is not interested in history for its own sake. Instead, he seeks to illuminate our current condition by searching out its breaks with and discontinuities from, as well as its connections to and links with the past

(Foucault 1991). Foucault's genealogies connect the present to the past by going back to the future. The genealogies of Randall Collins are somewhat opposite: they connect the past to the present. Through a firm footing in the historical conditions of the ideas he explores, Collins searches out and articulates, with great facility, the continuities of sociology; what one might call a sort of ongoing "historical exegesis" that focuses on the disciplines' major traditions, family resemblances, common challenges and comparable mistakes (1981, 1994, 1998). The value of both methods is their success at integrating the history and systematics of sociology.

By relying on these twin genealogical approaches, our story about sociology's complexity will move in dual directions, from the present to the past and the past to the present. Our story seeks out breaks and continuities, differences and similarities and it immerses itself in the history of sociology while taking at face value previous exegesis. With all of these points in mind, we turn to our story of sociology's complexity.

## 1.1 The Story of Sociology's Complexity

Our basic thesis—that is, the genealogy we wish to construct—is that western sociology (including its various smaller, national sociologies) has been and continues to be a profession of complexity, although not always of the same type. Industrialism, for example, is not postindustrialism, and European modernity is not American modernity. Nevertheless, since its formal emergence in the middle 1800s and, more specifically, since its establishment within the modern universities of Europe and North America at the turn of the previous century, the major challenge of sociology has been complexity (Baehr 2002; Collins 1994; Coser 1977; Heilbron 1995; Lepenies 1988; Merton 1968, 1996).

The primary basis for this challenge is western society. To study society is, by definition, to study complexity (Buckley 1998; Luhmann 1995; Urry 2003, 2005b). Starting with the industrial and "industrious" revolutions of the middle 1700s to early 1900s (Ashton 1964), western society transitioned—teleology not implied—into a type of complexity that, in many ways, did not previously exist (Toynbee 1884/2004). Urban centers and cities emerged, massive waves of emigration and immigration took place throughout Europe and North America; multiple ethnicities were forced to interact with one another; major innovations in technology, science and philosophy took place; democratic governments of various forms