

A Reflexive History of Jews in Classical Sociological Theorizing of Modernity

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Abstract

A reflexive history of sociological thought calls for uncovering the hidden intellectual assumptions that shape social theorizing often in unfruitful ways. According to Pierre Bourdieu, a small number of binary oppositions haunt contemporary thinking by forcing unreflected perceptions into taken-for-granted alternatives that divide, simplify, and rank complex and interconnected social realities into rigid hierarchical classifications. Such is the case in much theorizing of the transition from traditional to modern societies — the modernity problematic — that is a unifying theme in classical social theory. Chad Goldberg, in *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought*, deploys this kind of reflexive analysis by showing how the Jew/gentile binary has figured, sometimes positively mostly negatively, in the theoretical imagination of many of the classical sociologists in their views of modernization.

Keywords: Classical sociology; Jews; modernity; reflexive history; Bourdieu.

What is the purpose of the history of sociology? Is it, as Alvin Gouldner (quoted in Goldberg, 2020, p. 148; Gouldner, 1965, p. 168) once claimed, to be “intellectually undistinguished” and “hardly of any use or interest to anyone except graduate students preparing for their doctoral examinations”? Or can there be more? Of course there can be satisfaction in the sheer discovery of what was in the past. One can also look for antecedents to justify current preferences or realities. Or one can simply discount the relevance of the past for the urgency of the present (presentism). One can also historicize the past to relativize the

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omnipresent thinking of the present. Pierre Bourdieu ratchets up the potential in his vision for a “reflexive history that takes itself as its own object,” one that uncovers the hidden intellectual assumptions that continue to guide our thinking often in unfruitful ways. In Bourdieu’s words, “to avoid being puppets of the past, we must reappropriate the past for ourselves” (quoted in Goldberg, 2017, p. 6).

Reappropriating the past for Bourdieu means transcending a series of taken-for-granted dichotomies that give partial and fractured views of the social world. Bourdieu contends that “the prevailing discourse on the social world is produced on the basis of a small number of generating patterns that themselves derive from the opposition between the (outdated) past and the future — or, in vaguer and seemingly more conceptual terms, between the traditional and modern” (quoted in Goldberg, 2017, p. 7). As Bourdieu notes, the traditional/modern opposition evokes others, such as past/present, national/cosmopolitan, particular/universal, backward/progressive, and immobile/mobile. Bourdieu’s reflexive history aims to develop conscious awareness of how such dichotomies haunt contemporary thinking by forcing unreflected perceptions into taken-for-granted alternatives that divide, simplify, and rank complex social realities into rigid and inter-related hierarchical classifications. Take for example the concept of modernity. The transition from premodern (traditional) to modern societies — the modernity problematic — is a unifying theme in classical social theory. It is also one where binary thinking abounds: past/future, immobile/mobile, irrational/rational, etc. What can a “reflexive history” bring to it? Chad Alan Goldberg’s *Modernity and the Jews in Western Social Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 2017) offers an original contribution; namely, how Jews figured in the theoretical imagination to think about the premodern/modern binary in its multiple variations.

Goldberg’s book is a study of how “European and American social thinkers contrasted Jews and gentiles in a variety of ways by consciously invoking these differences to elucidate many of the dualisms that characterize modern social thought. What remained unconscious to them was the extent to which their ideas about the Jews, while seemingly only to reflect an objective reality, were inherited from the past and helped to organize their perception of reality.” It is this “hidden influence” that Goldberg’s work lays before us.

The book is co-winner of the American Sociological Association History of Sociology Section 2020 Distinguished Scholarly Publication Award. It has already received numerous reviews and is the object of a special symposium published in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* (2020, 20–22, pp. 148–160). It is an exemplary expression of the reflexive vision for a history of sociology. Based largely on primary sources though including numerous secondary ones as well, it is a first-rate piece of scholarship that advances considerably our knowledge of the classical tradition of sociology.

The book explores how key classical thinkers in sociology, Emile Durkheim in France, Karl Marx, Georg Simmel, Werner Sombart, and Max Weber in Germany, and William Isaac Thomas, Robert Park, Lewis Wirth, and Everett Stonequist in the United States employed images of Jews and Judaism in theorizing the transition from traditional to modern societies. The book shows “how ideas about the Jews” helped these classical sociologists to construct their understanding of modernity. The book makes a significant contribution to the history of classical sociological thought by going beyond the many previous fine studies that reflect on how the advent of modern, capitalist, urban, and diverse societies animated the thinking of sociology’s classical thinkers to show how Jews and Judaism functioned as symbolic mediators in their theorizing.

In his conventional account *The Sociological Tradition*, Robert Nisbet (1966) argues that

classical European sociology is best understood as responses to the problem of social order created by two revolutions: the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution. Less well understood is how Jews were connected discursively to both, either as agents and beneficiaries of these internal European upheavals or as reactionary forces obstructing social progress. Beyond Europe, Jews also figured prominently in the distinctly American version of modernity focused on mobility and urbanization, immigration and the transition from rural to urban society. Again Jews figured either positively as creative adapters to the city or negatively as sources of social conflict in the works of Thomas, Wirth, Park, and Stonequist as they addressed these themes.

Revisionist scholarship in the history of sociology (e.g. Connell, 1997; Steinmetz, 2007) has challenged in recent years the conventional accounts of modernity that neglect the role that Western colonialism played in Western theorizing of Orientalism or premodern societies. Moreover, colonial subjects have been given agency in the relationship between the metropole and its colonies (e.g. Go, 2013). Goldberg acknowledges these contributions but with two interesting caveats. First, within the metropole itself, Jews functioned in European and American classical thought as an internal and paradigmatic other. Othering was not reserved just for colonial subjects. Second, in many instances, images of Jews as representative of either Orientalism or Westernism overlap with discursive images of metropole-colonial relations where similar images of knowledge, power, and cultural domination came into play.

Unlike previous scholarship, this book makes the case for how Jews more than any other marginal group served in France, Germany, and the United States (offering a comparative perspective) as a major reference point for constructing the meaning of European and American modernity. For some, Jews represented premodern traditionalism opposing modernization; for others, they epitomized the new forces of modernization, either to be welcomed or feared. Goldberg tries to get at the underlying logic of these seemingly incoherent stances. He shows how Jews and Judaism functioned symbolically, either positively or negatively, as an intermediary in the theoretical imagination of the classical sociologists as they confronted the implications of the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution in Europe and the growth of the modern city with its immigration and social mobility issues in the US.

This book is not about the positive contributions of Jewish thinkers, such as Durkheim, Marx, Simmel, or Wirth, on classical sociological thought. That has been done before. Nor is it fundamentally an effort to document the many stripes of antisemitism that found expression in classical sociological thought, though antisemitism there was indeed, particularly present in the voice of Sombart (1913). This too has already been done by others. Rather this is a study of the role that Jews and Judaism played in the classical sociological thinking as it constructed modernity as a discursive category. It documents habits of thought from the classical era to the present.

The theme of how Jews figured in the theoretical imagination of classical sociology is probed in three core chapters. The second chapter considers how Jews were related to the French Revolution particularly in the sociology of Durkheim. The book shows that Durkheim, though not a practicing Jew, was more attentive to antisemitic issues than some other scholarship has suggested. Building on but going beyond the pioneering work of Pierre Birnbaum (1995) and Ivan Strenski (1997) on Durkheim's relationship to Judaism and antisemitism, Goldberg argues that key works of Durkheim are attentive to both reactionary antisemitism that depicted Jews as carriers of modernity symbolized by the Revolution and radical antisemitism that depicted Jews as traditionalist enemies of the new modern order.

The third chapter examines the relationship of Jews to modern industrial capitalism in the

works of the German classics: Marx, Simmel, Sombart, and Weber. Here Goldberg shows how these foundational thinkers in Germany used Jews as a reference point for defining modern capitalism and distinguishing it from traditional economic arrangements. Their thinking was shaped not only by the socioeconomic position of European Jews but also by cultural schemas about Jews inherited from the past, notably the Christian/Jew opposition from the first centuries of the Common Era.

Chapter four turns to the American case where issues of modernity centered on urbanization, mobility, and mass immigration. The chapter demonstrates how the classic thinkers of the Chicago School of Sociology used Jews, more than any other immigrant group — even African Americans —, as a touchstone for interpreting their new urban social order. For example, the dualism of old and new, traditional and modern, figured in Park's "marginal man." Park had studied with Simmel and drew on his idea of "the stranger" in formulating the concept of the marginal man, torn between the two worlds but who epitomized the new urban world. The Jew was the quintessential marginal man. Goldberg offers intriguing suggestions why the Jew rather than the American Black, though Park and associates were aware of and drew on DuBois' notion of double-consciousness, became the paradigmatic touchstone for marginal man in modernizing America.¹

In a back-cover blurb, Michael Walzer calls special attention to the concluding chapter where Goldberg brings his historical analysis to bear on how Jews figure in post-9/11 political discourse and othering. Have other minority groups today, notably Muslims, taken on the symbolic role in contemporary post 9/11 discussions of late modernity that Jews have historically played? Have Muslims become "the new Jew" as some claim? Goldberg answers no. He finds that Jews continue to represent the key reference for contemporary debates over the meaning of late modernity in Europe and America.

One of the forceful arguments of the book (it will be of particular interest to cultural sociologists) is that the way these classical sociologists using Jews as a touchstone for thinking about modernity drew not only on the socioeconomic marginality of Jews but also on prevailing cultural representations. Marginality is not just a material condition but is always culturally mediated. It draws on the premodern/modern opposition that overlays with correlated oppositions like past/future, small/large, particular/universal, local/cosmopolitan, immobile/mobile, and authoritarian/democratic, that rank groups in evaluative terms, such as Bourdieu argues, and have been central in the elaboration of classical sociological thought. Goldberg argues that this fundamental dualism is historically rooted in the traditional Christian/Jewish opposition established in the early centuries of the Common Era. This foundational religious opposition where Christians saw themselves as heirs of Judaism (traditionalism) but also the New Israel (modernity) became translated into secular sociological terms, sometimes as a modernizing vanguard that anticipates the future (a positive force) or at other times an earlier stage of development to be left behind (a negative force).

In sum, this book builds on previous scholarship in the history of sociology but goes beyond it. Rather than focusing on individual thinkers, this comparative work takes into account both the specificity of three national contexts and the individual career trajectories of nine foundational thinkers in sociology. Yet it also identifies common habits of thought in spite of these variations. It therefore represents an original contribution to the history of classical sociology not assembled in a coherent whole elsewhere. Certainly a worthy recipient of the 2020 ASA History of Sociology Section Award.

1. Goldberg does not confront Aldon Morris's (2015) reading of Park and DuBois on this. In a note he simply acknowledges that Morris offers an alternative reading of the relationship between DuBois and Park.

This said, I would offer a couple of critical observations. Does Goldberg go “too far in making Jews so central to the creation of modern sociology” as Daniel Chirot (2018) asks in his *Contemporary Sociology* review of the book? Fair question. The answer in the case of Durkheim is more subtle than Chirot suggests when he contends that “it is hard to see in most of his writing that Jews played a key role.” Since the founder of French sociology was a supporter of the French Revolution’s ideals for a secular republic, was not himself religiously practicing, and deplored traditional Judaism’s archaic rituals and beliefs, it is perhaps easy to draw this conclusion. Yet Durkheim was publicly quite outspoken against the antisemitism that undergirded the Dreyfus Affair. In addition, Taylor Winfield (2020) in “Rereading Durkheim in Light of Jewish Law: How a Traditional Rabbinic Thought-Model Shapes His Scholarship” has convincingly demonstrated that traditional rabbinic habits of thought permeated Durkheim’s scholarly work. Though ostensibly secular, Durkheim did not rid himself of his inherited rabbinic mind set. And this is Goldberg’s point: it is in the theoretical imagination of classical sociology that one needs to find the role that Jews played, not in the embrace of their beliefs and practices or their rejection.

Goldberg speaks specifically to Western social theorizing in three national contexts; Jews in, say, Chinese or Indian intellectual thinking could well be quite different. Moreover, Goldberg has a disciplinary focus: sociology. David Nirenberg (2013), in his widely considered volume, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, extends the scope of anti-Judaic conceptions not only to the broader Western intellectual tradition but also to how it extended to Egyptian, Greek, and Roman variations.

Further criticisms of this fine work can be found in the *Journal of Classical Sociology* (Goldberg, 2020) symposium on this book, which shows an exemplary intellectual exchange between author and critics that goes well beyond surface observations to probe more in depth certain issues. Because of space limitations, I will mention here just three key concerns. Does Goldberg miss non-national forms of solidarity and belonging not fully captured by the modernity problematic? Are there transnational intellectual connections missed because of the disciplinary and national foci? And does race make a key difference; does the deracialization of Jews make the comparison to American Blacks problematic?

I return, in conclusion, to Goldberg’s overall project of offering a reflexive history of classical sociological thought. How does this reflexive history of Jews in the Western social theory imagination possibly help us address pressing issues of the day? Goldberg’s work is not designed to offer ready solutions. He clearly is no supporter of right-wing populism or the resurgent expressions of antisemitism. But do not taken-for-granted binaries, such as particularism/universalism, emotional/rational, premodern/modern, bad/good, and Jew/gentile, shape our perceptions of these contemporary issues? And in so doing, might they simplify, distort, divide, and rank complex social realities just as Bourdieu warned against? This kind of critical historical reflection does not destroy these binary categorizations but it helps restrain them, like myths as Levi-Strauss famously argued, from simply speaking unwittingly through us. As Goldberg might put it:

Do we unwittingly gather around the intellectual totems of the day and let them think for us. Or by learning that they have been “good to think with,” do we gain a measure of freedom from simply repeating the past. Perhaps even be the future.

If a reflexive history of sociology can do that, this would be no small accomplishment.

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