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**John
Scott**

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Recovering Lost Traditions Before 1950



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WAS THERE A FAILURE OF BRITISH SOCIAL THEORY?

This is not a history of British sociology but of British social theory. Sociology in Britain is well-known for its long history of empirical and statistical research on poverty, inequality, and social conditions (Abrams 1968; Kent 1981; Platt 2014; Goldman 2002). Studies such as those of Booth (1901–2), Rowntree (1901), and Bowley (Bowley and Burnett-Hurst 1915) are widely seen as the characteristic achievements of British sociologists in the first half of the twentieth century. Far less often is there any mention of theoretical work undertaken in Britain. Indeed, many people, including many British sociologists, think that there is no British social theory. This book is an attempt to counter that view by recovering and outlining the varied lines of social theory that are now all but forgotten.

This task is important because social theory is central to all sociological understanding. The factual studies that epitomise British sociology have all depended on theoretical ideas, often implicit, to give them focus and a sense of direction. As is now widely recognised, what is to count as a fact is determined by the particular conceptual scheme that gives it meaning and allows inferences, interpretations, and expectations to be drawn from observations and statistical generalisations.

Attempts to theorise about the nature of ‘social’ life, and of the ways in which sociality and sociability have changed as human populations have developed, have been nurtured by sociologists and other social scientists on the basis of the pioneering work undertaken by those in earlier generations who wrote with different, or no, disciplinary affiliations. A history of social theory is important as it can uncover these foundations to enrich contemporary understandings and so recover ideas lost or forgotten that might receive renewed attention and illuminate contemporary concerns. For this reason, my concern in this book is with the particular contributions made by social theorists in Britain. Empirical studies of social conditions in particular historical or geographical settings – whether statistical or ethnographic – will receive far less attention than the conceptual innovations that have facilitated our understanding of the most general features of the social aspects of human existence. My principal concern is with the most general features of social life, with the

deeper forms of solidarity and conflict that underpin economic and political activities and comprise the central elements in what it is to be a 'society'.

My focus on the specifically British contribution to social theory perhaps requires some explanation and justification. The many available histories of sociology, however widely they cast their nets in the search for 'pioneers' and 'founders', provide little or no coverage of British work on social theory (e.g., Nisbet 1966; Aron 1967; Coser 1971; Giddens 1971). Indeed, there are relatively few that stray beyond the French, German, and American writers of the 'classical' period that runs from the 1890s to the 1920s. British sociologists are largely absent from all except the very earliest of these (Barnes and Becker 1938; Barnes 1948). With the partial exception of Herbert Spencer, British contributions to social theory are marginalised or ignored. By default, they are presumed not even to be worthy of consideration.

The most influential argument in support of this exclusion of British social theory is that of Perry Anderson (1968; and see the later view in Kyrtis 2014), who made the claim that British writers are legitimately absent from historical accounts of social theory because they simply do not exist. Anderson's review of the intellectual culture of the humanities and social sciences of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries concluded that history, economics, anthropology, and literary criticism in Britain could all be seen as intellectually comparable with their academic counterparts in other countries, having proliferated in university departments that have 'decades of tradition' behind them (Anderson 1968: 218). He concluded that in sociology, however, things were different. In 1968, the year that sociology exploded onto the international academic and political scene, the subject remained in the margins of the British universities and did not have the support of established Chairs in either Oxford or Cambridge. This institutional failure, he argued, was a consequence of the fact that 'Britain – alone of the major Western societies – never produced a classical sociology' (*ibid.*: 219). Anderson's contention was that Britain had not participated in the development of this new social science during the key period that had produced Durkheim in France, Weber in Germany, and Pareto in Italy.

This absence of a classical British sociology was explained by Anderson as reflecting the absence of a strong Marxist tradition in Britain. Classical social theory in Europe, he argued, had emerged as a reaction to and engagement with the critical questions raised by Marxism. British intellectuals, Anderson argued, never had to face a serious intellectual challenge from Marxism so did not develop any response. He also held that intellectuals in Britain had failed to learn from the further articulations of this classical work that Talcott Parsons had produced in the United States since the 1930s. Throughout this period, then, 'no sociologist of any original calibre was thrown up on these shores' (*ibid.*: 220; see also Soffer 1982). British intellectual culture as a whole suffered from this 'absent centre' that affected the form taken by all the various humanities and social sciences.

In a subsequent reconsideration of his views, Anderson (1990) acknowledged that he had wrongly ignored Spencer, and relied too much on Parsons's (1937)

reconstruction of the history of social theory. Nevertheless, he maintained that Spencer was a second-rate thinker whose work was incomparable with that of either Durkheim or Weber. This harsh judgement on one of the most influential sociologists of the nineteenth century betrayed a failure on Anderson's part to have actually read any of Spencer's work, along with a failure to recognise how much Durkheim and Weber, as well as other classical sociologists, owed to Spencer's prior work.

Anderson had justified his exclusion of Spencer on the grounds that his particular focus had been on the period between 1880 and 1914, Spencer having largely completed his work by this time. Despite his belated and begrudging recognition of Spencer, there was no similar recognition by Anderson that his focus had also meant the exclusion of any consideration of writers such as John Stuart Mill, who engaged with both Comte and Spencer and published his own contribution to the building of a general social science. Anderson's focus on the classical period had led him to ignore not only Spencer and Mill but also a number of other nineteenth- and eighteenth-century writers who, like their counterparts in other European societies, pursued theoretical sociology long before Comte's invention of the word 'sociology' in 1838. My own account takes a broader point of view and acknowledges the numerous contributions to theoretical sociology that were made by many of those who, in other contexts, would have considered themselves as historians, geographers, and litterateurs, or would have been seen simply as informed 'amateurs'. The disciplinary label attached to or adopted by these writers is unimportant when it can be shown that they share concerns that would today be regarded as sociological. Even after its invention, the label 'Sociology' was rejected by many nineteenth-century writers precisely because of its association with Comte's positivism and his religion of humanity. Not until relatively late in the nineteenth century were experiments in 'Sociology' established anywhere in the world, and even after this time much social theory was undertaken in Departments with other designations or outside the university system.

However, Anderson's account of the classical period itself completely ignored the important contributions that had been made by Leonard Hobhouse, Patrick Geddes, and Robert MacIver, all of whom produced major works in the period and contributed to the building of a sociological profession with a university base. Anderson did not demonstrate any intellectual failings in their work, but he seems simply to have been unaware of their existence. His remarks on the institutional failure of British sociology show no awareness of the fact that Hobhouse held a named Chair in sociology a decade or more before either Durkheim or Weber were appointed to Chairs in sociology.

Taking a broader view and longer historical perspective, I have identified four broad strands of social thought that informed sociological understanding in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The strongest of these comprised the work of those who explored the forging of individual actions by environmental conditions and the consequent structures of social relationships and cultural ideas through which individual actions are further shaped. While classical economic theory

was the principal outcome of this line of thought, its key contributors – from Adam Smith through Henry Buckle, Harriet Martineau, and John Stuart Mill – placed economic theories in a broader sociological framework and devised an account of the various historical stages through which social structures could be seen to have passed. These writers explored the interdependence of culture and environment, the formation of social structures as the unintended outcome of intentional actions, the equilibrium conditions of social structures, and the dynamic element provided by class divisions and class conflict. In parallel with this line of thought was one that focused on culture and its role in the adaptation of human populations to the physical environments in which they live and to which they migrate. It was in this line of thought that specifically developmental views were formulated, with evolutionary processes providing the mechanisms through which social structures changed over time. John Lubbock, Edward Tylor, Benjamin Kidd, and Herbert Spencer were the key contributors in this approach. These writers explored cultural formations and cultural socialisation, the organic interdependence of elements within social systems, and the differentiation of social institutions and practices as societies develop through distinct stages of growth. Ideas about community, cohesion, and solidarity formed the basis of a third line of thought that was first articulated in the romantic poetry of William Wordsworth and Samuel Coleridge and in the cultural criticism of Thomas Carlyle, but eventuated in a body of idealist theorising that, in the hands of Bernard Bosanquet, depicted the structure of a social system as a social construction that exists in the minds of individuals but is felt by them to be an external and constraining power that shapes their actions. Idealist writers explored the importance of language and communication, the integrative power of social institutions and the structure of communities, the social shaping of the self, and the ideal or moral reality of social facts. Materialist and idealist concerns were brought together in a fourth line of thought rooted in socialist critiques of political economy. Writers in this tradition stressed the shaping of economic actions by cultural values and the institutional structures that constrain ways of life. From William Morris through Eleanor Marx, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and John Hobson, this group of writers shadowed the individualistic mainstream and provided an understanding of the material basis for the moral realities considered by the idealists. They examined the alienating effects of the cash nexus, the destructive effects of property and the market on sexuality and gender relations, the polarisation of class relations, and the global organisation of capital in imperialist social structures.

I have termed these ‘lines of thought’ rather than ‘schools’ of thought in order to emphasise that they formed loose strands of discussion and debate that followed broad lines of argument but did not congeal into distinct groupings of self-identifying social theorists. Within each line of thought, writers related to and engaged with their predecessors and carried forward their concerns, but they did not generally regard themselves as pursuing a particular and exclusive approach to the social world. A corollary of this was that they engaged with the ideas of those developing different lines of thought and were involved in overlapping, interweaving lines of

argument and discussion with them. Behind their considerable diversity and many disagreements were significant shared understandings about the principal forces shaping social life. These shared ideas became more prominent and self-conscious as the arguments developed.

The work of those I see as central to 'classical' sociology in Britain – Geddes, MacIver, and Hobhouse – drew on earlier ideas to construct their own syntheses of social thought, combining them in varying ways. Geddes outlined a system theory of material and ideal interchanges and saw social development as driving towards a globalisation of social relations and establishing an increasingly complex relationship between collective action and the physical environment. MacIver devised a rigorous understanding of the relationships between associational and communal structures in the organisation of social life. Hobhouse took forward an idealist reconstruction of Spencer's views and showed how its social development is constrained by the material environment to produce shifting patterns of communal and associational relations. Like Geddes, he saw social development as a process that could be brought under human control as a result of a growth in sociological understanding.

These 'classical' ideas dominated social thought in the first half of the twentieth century, with Hobhouse's formulation eventually prevailing alongside a diversity of other theories that developed subsidiary and related arguments. It was the work of Hobhouse, as represented largely by his disciple Morris Ginsberg, that was encountered after the Second World War by the first significant generation of sociology students (Halsey 1973). Their vision of the subject was dominated by that of Hobhouse and, in consequence, they had little awareness of what had preceded it. It was their antipathy to Ginsberg's presentation of Hobhouse's arguments that led many of them to an enthusiastic embrace of the ideas that Talcott Parsons had been working on in the United States. The Parsonian image and approach to sociology that they took into their own teaching ensured that the earlier British writers and Hobhouse himself were rapidly forgotten. As someone influenced by the ideas of this post-war generation of sociologists, Perry Anderson was bound to share their misremembrance of the past. In his turn he and his generation enthusiastically welcomed the ideas of the French and German theorists of the 1960s into the sociology curriculum. As a result, the British contribution to social theory was all but buried by the time that Anderson began to produce his account of British national culture.

My concern in this book is to recapture this lost history of British social thought. I hope to fill the gaps in conventional accounts of the history of sociology. However, my aim is not purely antiquarian; I will also show that many of the ideas discussed by the British social theorists still have a relevance today. Indeed, many of their ideas have been restated by contemporary theorists without any recognition of the past contributions or on the basis of an unknowing misrepresentation of the source of the ideas and their attribution solely to others. It is important to recover these lost traditions of thought in order to reassess their relevance for contemporary concerns.