

# Classical social theory

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The first "modern" social theories (known as classical theories) that begin to resemble the analytic social theory of today developed almost simultaneously with the birth of the science of sociology. Auguste Comte (1798-1857), known as the "father of sociology" and regarded by some as the first philosopher of science,[4] laid the groundwork for positivism - as well as structural functionalism and social evolutionism. In the 19th century three great classical theories of social and historical change emerged: the social evolutionism theory (of which Social Darwinism forms a part), the social cycle theory and the Marxist historical materialism theory.

Another early modern theorist, Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), coined the term "survival of the fittest". Some Post-Modern social theorists like Shepard Humphries, draw heavily upon Spencer's work and argue that many of his observations are timeless (just as relevant in 2008 as 1898). Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) and Pitirim A. Sorokin argued that 'history goes in cycles', and presented the social cycle theory to illustrate their point. Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) made community and society (*Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, 1887) the special topics of the new science of "sociology", both of them based on different modes of will of social actors.

Most of the 19th century pioneers of social theory and sociology, like Saint-Simon, Comte, Marx, John Stuart Mill or Spencer, never held university posts. In this sense they were broadly regarded as philosophers. Emile Durkheim, however, endeavoured to formally established academic sociology, and did so at the University of Bordeaux in 1895, publishing his *Rules of the Sociological Method*. In 1896, he established the journal *L'Année Sociologique*. Durkheim's seminal monograph, *Suicide* (1897), a case study

of suicide rates amongst Catholic and Protestant populations, distinguished sociological analysis from psychology or philosophy.

Many of the classical theories had one common factor: they all agreed that the history of humanity is pursuing a certain fixed path. They differed on where that path would lead: social progress, technological progress, decline or even fall, etc. Social cycle theorists were much more skeptical of the Western achievements and technological progress, however, arguing that progress is but an illusion of the ups and downs of the historical cycles. The classical approach has been criticized by many modern sociologists and theorists, among them Karl Popper, Robert Nisbet, Charles Tilly and Immanuel Wallerstein.

Karl Marx rejected Comtean positivism but nevertheless aimed to establish a science of society based on historical materialism, becoming recognised as a founding figure of sociology posthumously. At the turn of the 20th century, the first wave of German sociologists, including Max Weber and Georg Simmel, developed sociological antipositivism. The field may be broadly recognised as an amalgam of three modes of social scientific thought in particular; Durkheimian sociological positivism and structural functionalism, Marxist historical materialism and conflict theory, and Weberian antipositivism and verstehen critique.