

Kenneth Tucker, Jr.

Classical Social Theory: A Contemporary Approach.

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Kenneth Tucker's *Classical Social Theory* is a broad-based descriptive account of some of the key sociological theorists of the 19th and 20th centuries. To his credit, the scope of this book is well beyond the standard classical canon of Marx, Durkheim and Weber and includes theoretical treatments of Nietzsche, Freud, Simmel, Perkins Gilman — a 19th century American writer on woman's issues — and W.E.B. Du Bois, whose main work, *The Soul of Black Folk*, is just now being recognized as an important sociological study.

This work is in the tradition of writings on classical sociological theory beginning with Jeffery Alexander (1982), Steven Lukes (1972) and Mark Cladis (1992), whose writings have a similar broad-based focus beyond the classical canon of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. In addition, I would place it in the context of such writings as Anthony Giddens' *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* (1971), Ian Craib's more recent account of the classics in *Classical Social Theory* (1997) and Erving Zeitlin's *Ideology and the Development of Sociological Theory* (1966). Certainly, its main influences — Jeffery Alexander, Mack Cladis, Robert Alun Jones — are American and, to be clear, this is an American contribution to social theory, in contrast to a European, British or Canadian contribution. I say this at the outset because Canadian sociological theory, as seen in the work of Smith (1999) or Morrison (1995), tends to be more European in influence, certainly more continental and a little more eclectic in its use of Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Foucault, Bourdieu, etc. This is in contrast to the American tradition which tends to be more Parsonian in the way it forces all kinds of contortions on the classical tradition to be cumulative and homogeneous.

Overall, the book is organized around three main thematic sections. In the first, the author looks at the social and intellectual context of classical social theory from the enlightenment to Nietzsche; in the second, he examines the core of the classical sociological canon by looking at the theories of Marx, Durkheim and Weber from the perspective of modernism, capitalism and social solidarity; and in the third, he attempts to expand the sociological canon, on the one hand, by looking at theories of the unconscious and the self proposed by Freud, Simmel and Mead, and on the other, by incorporating the views on race and gender put forward by Du Bois and Perkins Gilman.

Let me begin by looking at the introductory section of *Classical Social Theory* and some of the key issues related to the design of the book. Initially, Tucker notes that for several decades the study of social theory has been restricted to a reading of the 19th century works of Marx, Durkheim and Weber. Certainly, this has been the case since the 1960s when the first generation of American commentaries on classical sociological theory, such as Nisbet, Martindale and Zeitlin, began to appear. Tucker quite rightly points out that this early tradition of commentary has generally been accompanied by a standard set of themes including the discovery of society, the transformation of Western economies, the conservative response to the French revolution and the emergence of capitalism. But he goes on to point out that, while social theory in the past has tended to restrict itself to the narrow themes of modernism, it can no longer afford to be indifferent to contemporary issues of race, gender and the problem of colonialism in the West. In this context, the key aim of the book is to extend the debate on social questions discussed by Marx, Durkheim and Weber to the contemporary issues of race, gender, colonialization and identity. These issues, says Tucker, have tended either to

be marginalized or ignored altogether by the classical theorists.

In the section entitled 'The Sociological Canon and its Problems', Tucker goes on to state that the issues covered by the 19th century classical theorists are generally much too narrow in relation to the issues that have become dominant in the 20th century and this, says Tucker, makes all the 19th century classical assumptions problematic. The plan of the book, therefore, is to explore what the classical theorists have done through the lenses of four related contemporary questions: (i) the threat to democracy and the public sphere in the 21st century; (ii) the paradox of rationality and the disciplinary society; (iii) the problem of the dominance of the West evident in the history of colonialism and (iv) the issue of individual cultural and political identities relating to class, race and gender.

In the second chapter of the book, Tucker traces the history of philosophical ideas of the 18th and 19th centuries as they relate to the discovery of society and the development of 19th century social thought. In this context, he shows how Kant's key political and ethical writings of the 18th century influenced the development of sociological theory in the 19th century, especially in relation to the themes of republicanism and democracy posed by such thinkers as Tocqueville and Durkheim. Then, in the same context, Tucker pursues the problem of identity and the self as it appears in the work of the philosophical pragmatists witnessed in the writings of James and Mead, and the philosophy of identity and power developed by Nietzsche. After drawing on the concepts of identity and self, he goes on to integrate these ideas into the themes of social thought in the 19th century with the work of Freud and Simmel.

In the Marx chapter, Tucker focuses on issues related to capitalism and class struggle in the context of the contemporaneous questions of democracy, disciplinary society and the problem of the fragmentation of civil society. But Tucker's coverage here tends to be much too brief and is far removed from the actual theoretic arguments that are found in *The German Ideology* or in *Capital*. To this extent, Tucker's summary of Marx provides little exposition of his theories of society or social formation, and in some cases they read like brief journalistic treatments of his main theoretical texts. Also, the addition of the contemporary themes of democracy, gender and the disciplinary society are too briefly dealt with to make 19th century classical theory contemporaneous with 21st century problems of democracy, gender and race. The same set of questions and issues is applied to the Durkheim and Weber chapters in which key arguments related to the question of social solidarity and social structure are treated with the same almost journalistic brevity.

In the final chapter, Tucker provides two points of coverage which constitute one of the more innovative contributions of the book. This is his discussion of W.E.B. Du Bois and Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose writings on race and gender are elucidated in the context of early 20th century American society, and the observations they provide on questions of segregation policy, the family, gender inequality and the overall structure of social distinctions in early American life. But in this context, Tucker is unable to provide any direct theoretical link between the historically recurring problems of race, gender and inequality in American society and the underlying patterns of social and historical development that would either lead to the actual forms of social exclusion we see in respect to race, class and gender or to the institutional forms of social demarcation evident in the field of schooling, the family, the economy and the law as discussed by Du Bois or Perkins Gilman.

In looking back finally on Kenneth Tucker's *Classical Social Theory*, I am of two minds: On the one hand, the writing is fast paced and interesting, and I think that Tucker's efforts to re-work classical

sociological theory in the light of contemporary questions is largely successful. To this extent, Tucker's book would be a welcome addition to undergraduate courses in sociological theory mainly for its excellent discussion of the threats to democracy posed by globalization and the contribution it makes in opening up a discussion of the history of colonialism and the problem of cultural and political identities.

On the other hand, some of Tucker's expositions of the classical arguments seem overly reductive and poor at the level of concept transmission. For instance, while attempting to expand the classical canon by introducing the problem of colonialism in the West, Tucker does not take adequate account of Marx's writings on British colonialism in India, or of Weber's conception of the relation between caste, status, and political identity discussed in his conception of minority populations as a 'pariah people'. And, at the same time that he faults the classical tradition with respect to gender, he overlooks Engels' discussion of the problematic of women with respect to social class and the question of the family in the context of the reproduction of the worker in his *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*.

This leads me to think that Tucker is not a systematic reader of classical texts and that he has succumbed to the old problem of the commentary tradition going back as far as Martindale, Aron, Giddens and Hughes: how much do we abridge from the classical tradition?

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