On *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*

John A. Bernau

October 20, 2019

In this book, Levine (1995) outlines the history of sociology in six narratives: positivist, pluralist, synthetic, humanist, contextualist, and dialogical. In part two, he traces the development of sociology as a dialogue within and between seven national traditions: Hellenic, British, French, German, Marxian, Italian, and American. This type of meta-narrative and its depiction of national traditions will always spur debate and calls for nuance, but the book remains a useful primer on sociology and the history of its disciplinary identity.

Levine's book is an essential text for all professional sociologists. It begins by offering a "history of histories" that describes the various ways sociologists have tried to make sense of their work. Levine then situates familiar sociological pioneers within a multi-generational global conversation about human nature, society, and ethics that birthed modern social science. This approach deftly avoids the type of "great man" history popular in undergraduate teaching by treating seven national traditions as the unit of analysis. Finally, it concludes with a call to adopt this "dialogical narrative" to unite a fragmented discipline while abandoning nostalgic visions of a univocal sociology. With its impressive command of intellectual history and theoretical clarity, I found Levine's book an indispensable resource as a sociologist struggling to make sense of our intellectual diversity. While I leave the reader to extract the many insights of the text, I provide a few key takeaways below.

Part one describes five narratives of sociological history: positivist, pluralist, synthetic, humanist, and contextualist. Each narrative emerged at a different juncture in the discipline's self-awareness in the mid-nineteenth century and speaks to multiple aspects of the sociological tradition.

First, the **positivist narrative** of sociology began with Auguste Comte in 1835 and borrows the classical features of natural science: objectivity, empirical rigor, and cumulative progress towards discovering universal laws of social life. An understanding of these laws will ultimately allow scientific predictions that empower humans to solve practical problems. While a laudable ideal, this narrative ignores the influence of intellectual fashion and ideological elements in the march of science. It also neglects the

embeddedness of scientific observations in multiple frames of reference that are not easily reconciled.

Nearly one hundred years later, the **pluralist narrative** began with Pitirim Sorokin in 1928 and highlights the need for diverse sociological perspectives to understand something as complex as "society." Using an evolutionary taxonomy, this narrative describes how each branch of sociological investigation contributes to a different type of understanding and is irreducible to a single notion of cumulative knowledge or scientific progress.

The tension between these two narratives raised important questions: how can sociology be objective and empirical while allowing multiple "perspectives" to flourish? Surely there needs to be some criteria to discriminate between competing theories, methods, and conclusions. The **synthetic narrative** took shape with Talcott Parsons in 1937 and his attempt to unify sociology under one theoretical umbrella. Rejecting the creeping relativism suggested by pluralist narratives, Parsons argued for a common basis of sociological attention: the importance of norms and social structure in governing human action. Of course, disagreements about Parsons' interpretation of classical figures undermined the ethos of this synthetic ideal and today the work is acknowledged to have many problems (Camic 1989).

The last two narratives Levine describes are products of the social upheaval of the 1960s:

> "These changes produced demands for sociologists to take principled stands on policy questions and to play a more activist role in solving social problems, demands that contradicted the spirit of ethical neutrality most sociologists associated with their claims to professional credibility," (Levine 1995:60).

The **humanist narrative** highlights the canonical status of classical works by Durkheim, Weber, and Simmel and argues for their continued relevance and aesthetic appreciation. The **contextualist narrative** takes a sociological approach to sociology itself, emphasizing the role of cultural, economic, and political factors on the popularity and success of various sociological ideas. Primarily led by Marxists who though sociology was defending the status quo, this type of deconstructionist history imparted late twentieth-century sociology with a creeping malaise, best exemplified by Alvin Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (1970).

Naturally, each of these narratives has something to offer. I find myself drawn to the positivist-synthetic narratives: shouldn't we be striving for the cumulation of objective knowledge about the social world? While acknowledging the value of multiple perspectives, shouldn't sociologists trend towards agreement as we get closer to "the truth"? But I suspect each reader's prior encounters with sociology will recommend a different narrative. Levine offers a sixth type of **dialogical narrative**: sociology is a multigener-

ational global conversation propelled by the secularization of moral thought. Absent an all-encompassing religious narrative, people all over the world began to grapple with at least three big questions:

How can we best understand human history and experience?

Where do moral dispositions come from?

How can secular-rational thought bring about a good society?

In part two, Levine uses these three questions to frame a story of seven traditions of social thought. To summarize his summaries, here's 100 words on each:

Hellenic tradition

In one of the first departures from religious cosmology, Hellenic philosophers searched for a rational foundation for "goodness." While the natural sciences searched for universal laws, the social sciences dealt with humans who had free will, differing opinions of the good, and experienced different situations. Thus, according to Aristotle, there was no "universally right action" and the task of the social sciences was to carefully weigh variables and opinions to determine the best course of action. Absent this deliberation, Aristotle encouraged the cultivation of moral habits that would ultimately lead to a good life for individuals and society.

British Tradition

Nearly two thousand years later, Thomas Hobbes wrote *Leviathan*, the foundational text of all modern social science. Inspired by Galileo's theory of constant motion, Hobbes proposed a state of nature in which humans strive for power and safety, ultimately entering into voluntary contracts to secure these from the state. This "atomic naturalism" provided answers to Levine's three big questions and gave rise to perennial debates about human rights and the role of government. Thinkers like Hume, Smith, Locke, Bentham, Mill, and Spencer each advanced the agenda of social science but few departed from an epistemic, naturalistic, and normative individualism.

French Tradition

Beginning with Montesquieu in 1748, the French put forth a type of "societal essentialism" that maintained a connection to the natural world while emphasizing the primacy of social relations. Rousseau argued for the natural goodness of human nature, Saint-Simon discussed the importance of social solidarity, and Comte christened this tradition "sociology." Durkheim offered book-length answers to each of Levine's big questions: *Suicide* demonstrates the validity of understanding the world through social facts, *Elementary Forms* uncovers the source of moral dispositions in collective life, and *Division of Labor* explores how these facts can be used to bring about a good society.

German Tradition

Whereas the French rejected British "atomism," Kant also rejected the "naturalism" inherent in both traditions. For Kant, morality could only be based on the creativity of self-determining rational people. Thus, the German tradition was shaped by Kant's distinction between the natural and the rational. Hence Schopenhauer's attempt to reconcile world and will in 1818, and Tönnies' concepts of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*—two forms of social organization based on natural similarity and rational contracts, respectively. Dilthey's concept of *verstehen* emphasized subjective rationality, and Weber's value-neutral approach maintained the separation of facts and values, in contrast to Durkheim.

Marxian Tradition

Marx's intellectual development can be seen as a journey from German to British inclinations by way of French social theory. His final synthesis borrowed Kant's self-determination, Hegel's collective historical development, French notions of social classes, and British conceptions of competitive individualism in the marketplace. However, at least two tensions remain. First, Marx equivocates on the morality of nature vs. self-determination. He argues against unnatural states (i.e. industrial capitalism), but also asserts that freedom requires transcending natural states. Second, Marx and Engels belittle morality as class ideology, making it difficult for later Marxists to provide a strong critique of Marxist regimes.

Italian Tradition

Writing more than a hundred years before Hobbes, Machiavelli outlines an equally dim view of human nature and advocates a hierarchical social order ruled by forceful elites. Subsequent Italian theorists modified Marxism in four ways. First, they saw political forces as more than consequents of materialist factors. Second, they espoused the necessity of a forceful ruling class. Third, they realized how ideology provides essential social coherence. Lastly, they saw history as a cycle marked by the unending circulation of elites. Gramsci's prison notebooks from the 1930s did much to synthesize this new Marxism for post-WWII social scientists.

American Tradition

Many early American theorists were Protestants looking for a secular worldview to replace their "tortuously abandoned religious beliefs" (Levine 1995:257, also see Henking 1992). To this end, they aimed to understand all human action as a form of evolutionary adaptation. This resolved two previous tensions. First, they rejected the dichotomy of individual vs societal essentialism; these mutually constitutive elements gave rise to "social selves." Second, they rejected Kant's dichotomy of the natural vs. rational. The

capacity for rational voluntary action is a naturally evolved human trait. Returning to an Aristotelian morality, they advocated pro-social habits rather than universal proscriptions.

With these national traditions in mind, Levine ends the book with an evocative metaphor of globalization. Much like early nation states, the formation of social science in the early nineteenth century evoked fervent disciplinary loyalty, programmatic statements, and efforts to delineate appropriate intellectual jurisdiction. Today's landscape resembles a globalized community where identities are no longer based on formal boundaries.

> "For one thing, each of those disciplines established beachheads or won converts among the practitioners of other disciplines. At present few major concepts, methods, or problems belong exclusively to a single social science discipline" (Levine 1995:291).

Ironically, this metaphor suggests that Levine's own nationalistic orientation is only appropriate in hindsight: today's sociologists should be less keen to identify with a particular tradition than to join an open conversation around important questions. Nonetheless, in navigating our disciplinary disagreements, Levine's book acts as a sort of group therapy. With each narrative and tradition invited in the same room to share their stories, we can come away with a better understanding of our common goal: to understand the social world in a deliberate and systematic way.

References

Camic, Charles. 1989. "Structure After 50 Years: The Anatomy of a Charter." *American Journal of Sociology* 95(1):38–107.

Gouldner, Alvin. 1970. *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. New York: Basic Books.

Henking, Susan E. 1992. "Protestant Religious Experience and the Rise of American Sociology: Evidence from the Bernard Papers." *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 28(4):325–39.

Levine, Donald N. 1995. *Visions of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Appendix

All figures from Levine (1995): British (p131), French (p161), German (p196), Italian (p246), and American (p264) traditions. Basic postulates of seven traditions (Appendix C, no page number), and major traditions network (p280).

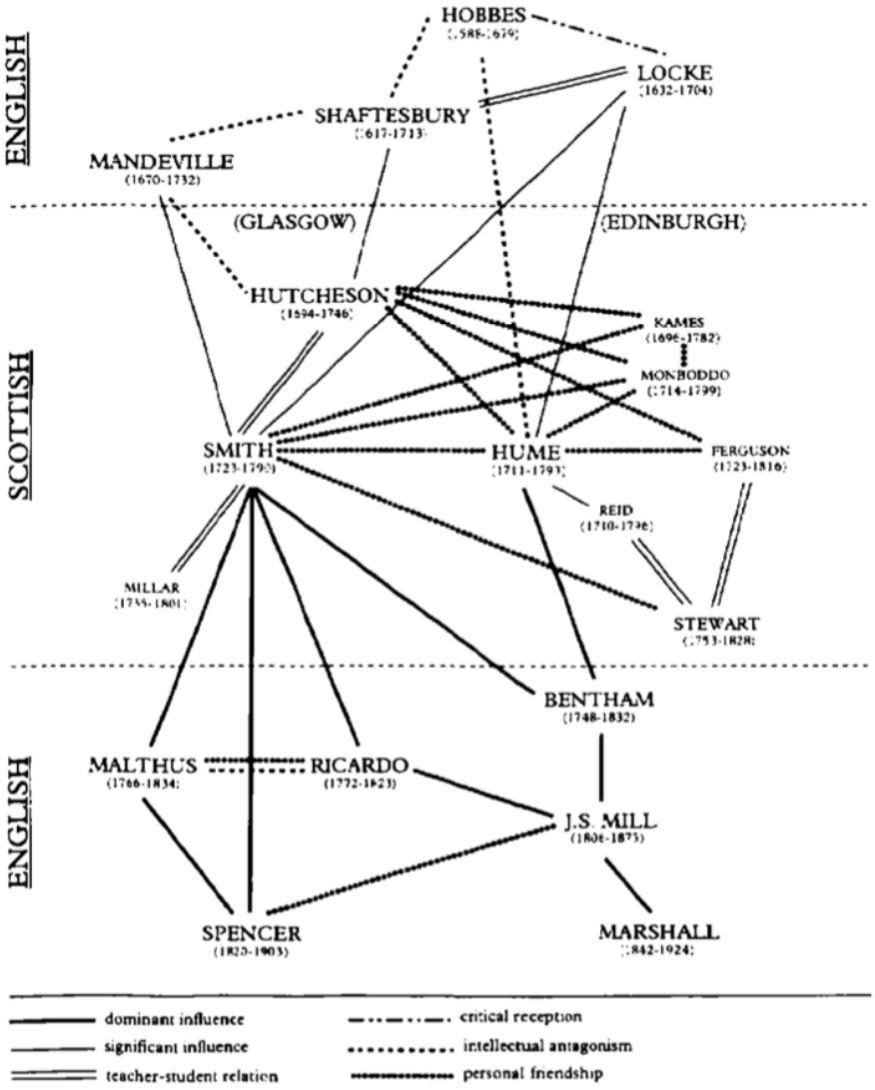

Figure 6. Links in the British Tradition

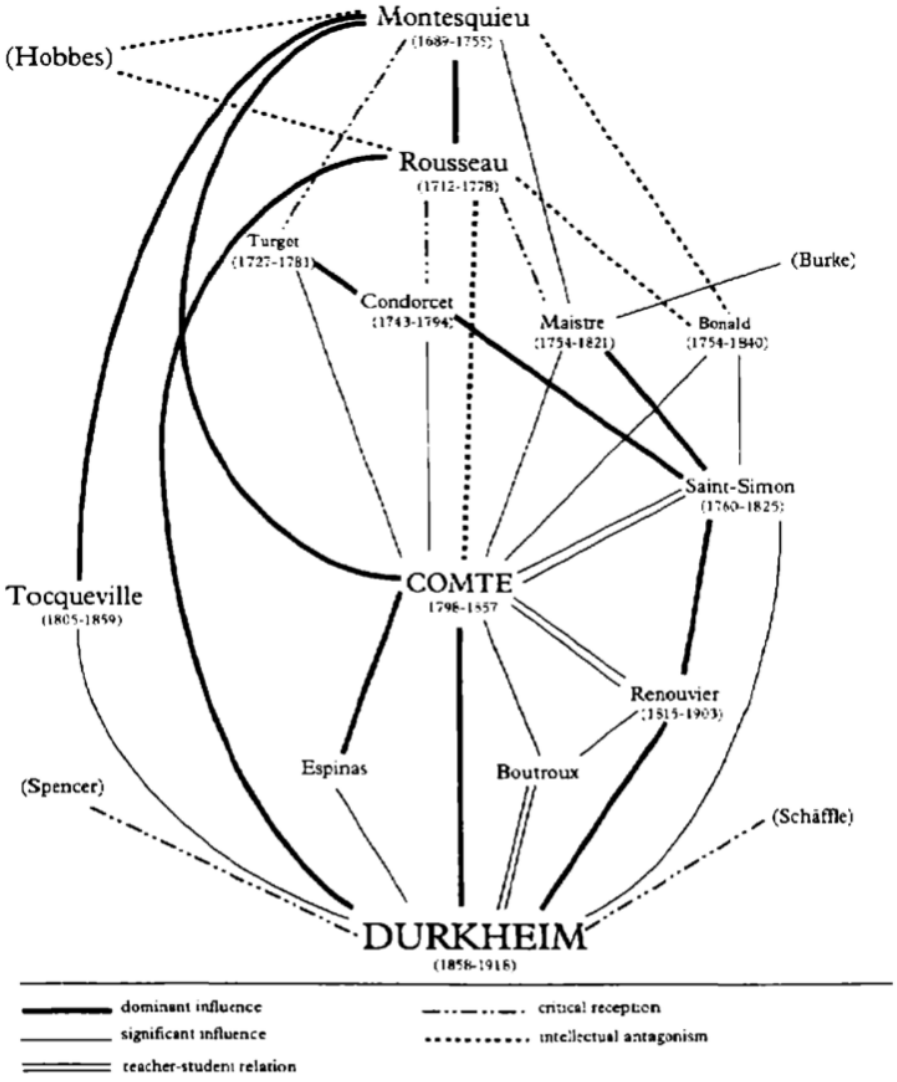

Figure 7. Links in the French Tradition

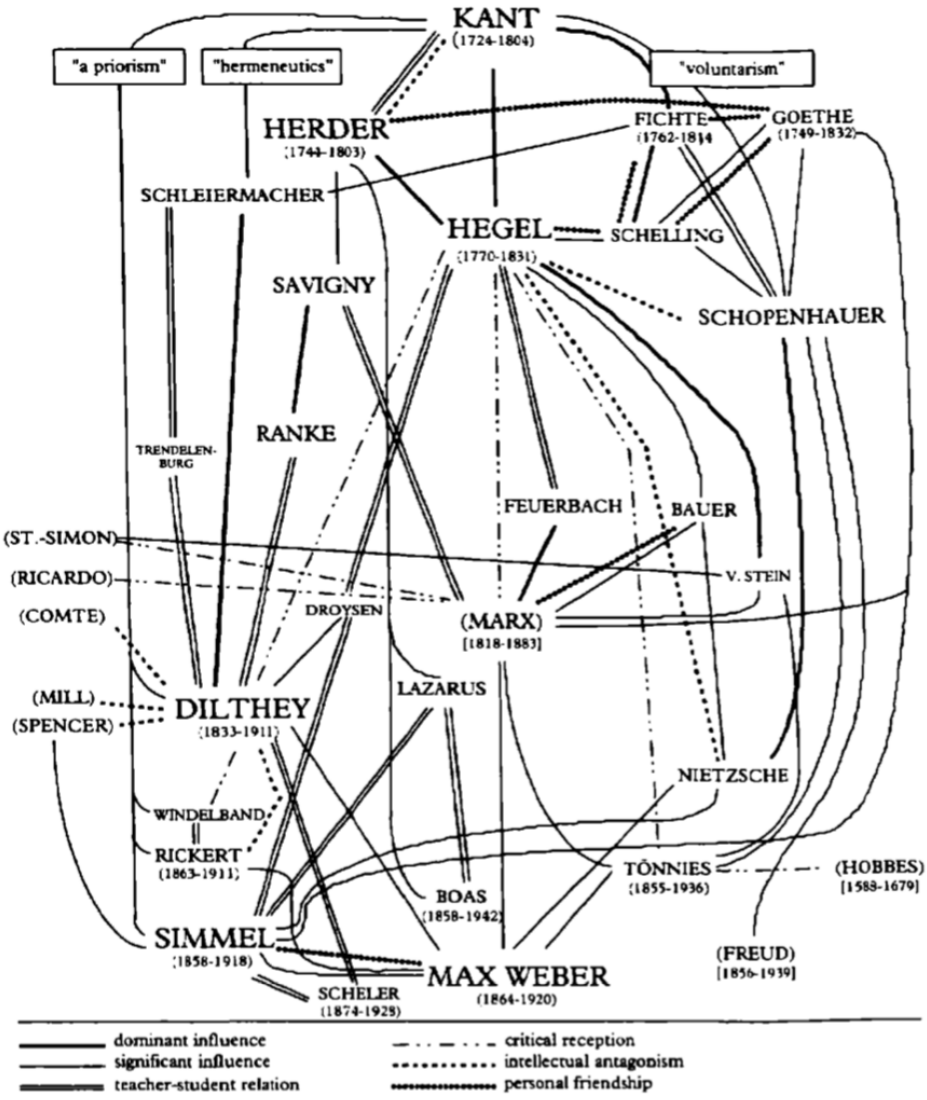

Figure 10. Links in the German Tradition

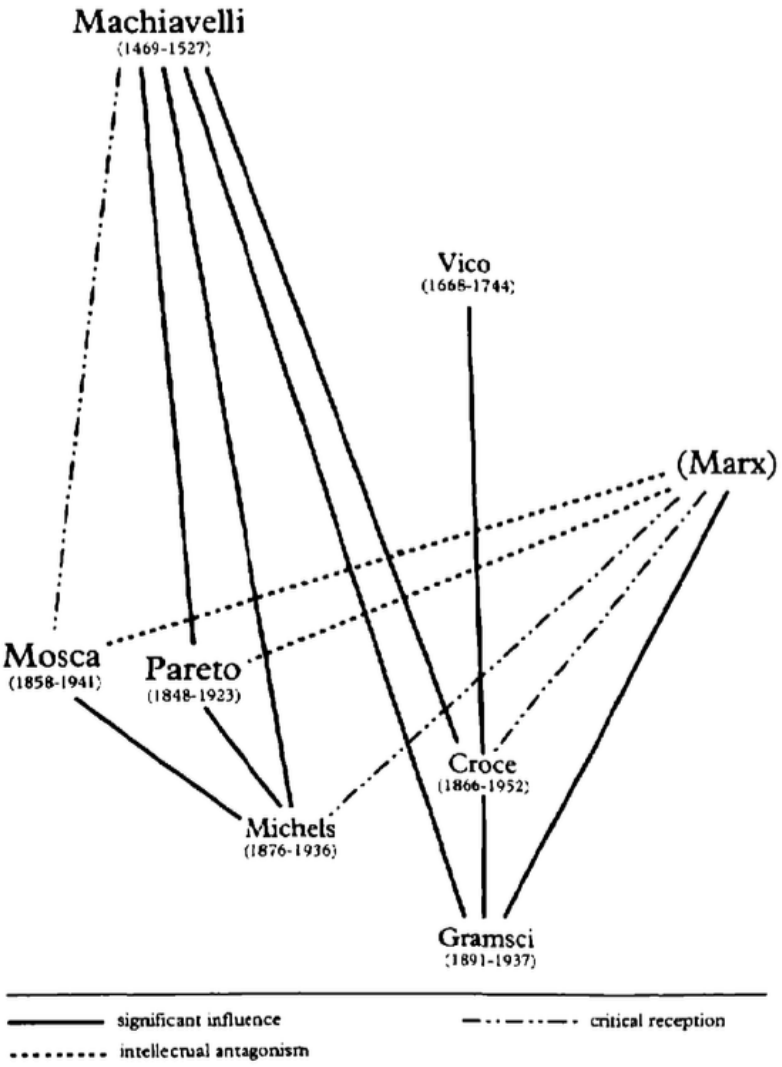

Figure 12. Links in the Italian Tradition

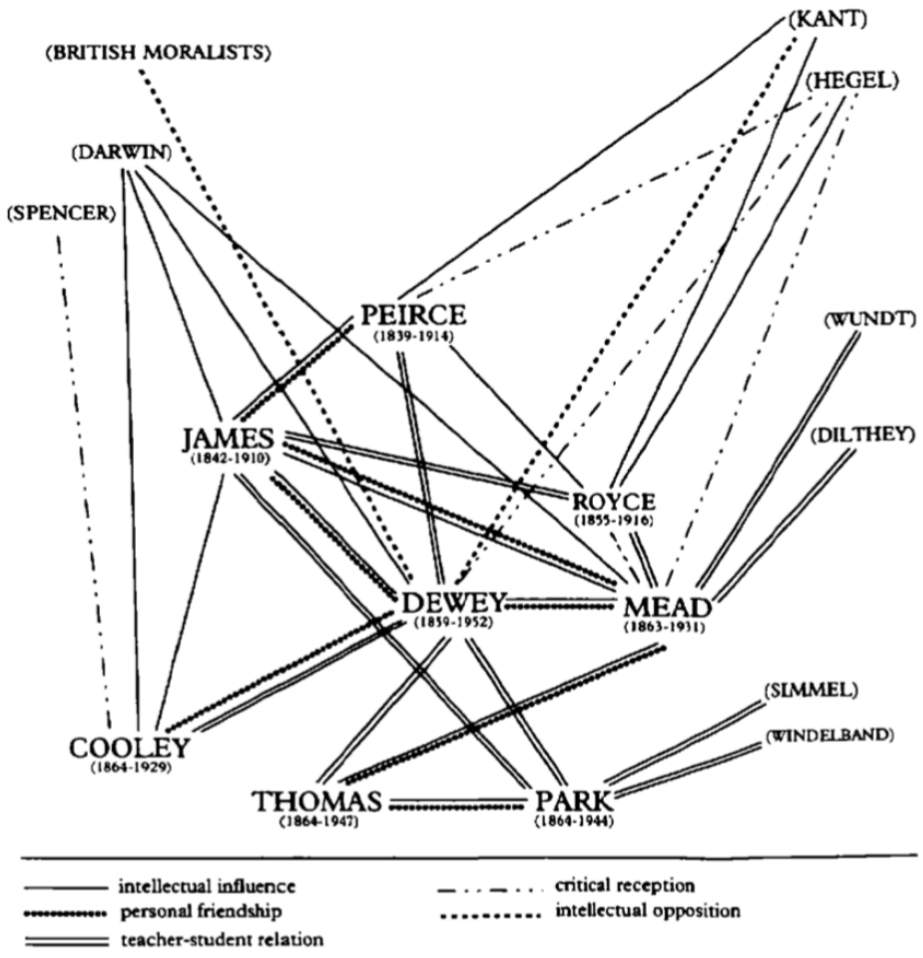

Figure 13. Links in the American Tradition

APPENDIX C

Basic Postulates of the Seven Traditions

	CONCEPTION OF NATURE	PRINCIPLE OF GOOD SOCIETY	SOURCE OF MORAL DISPOSITIONS	PHENOMENAL CONSTRUCTS
ARISTOTLE	Goal-directed Potentialities	Organized to Promote Virtue and Justice	Socialized Habits and Reflective Capacity	Mutually Determinative Parts and Wholes
BRITISH	Atoms in Motion → ATOMIC NATURALISM	Normative Individualism	Natural Individual Morality	Methodological Individualism
FRENCH	Different Levels of Phenomenal Reality → SOCIETAL ESSENTIALISM	Societal Normativity	Societal Morality	Societal Realism
GERMAN	Lawful Determinism, Opposed to SUBJECTIVE VOLUNTARISM	Normative Self-determination	Subjective Voluntarism (free will)	Subjective Meaning
MARXIAN	External Determinism → HISTORICAL MATERIALISM	Communal Production in Classless Society	Class-determined Morality	Dialectical Materialism
ITALIAN	Systems in Equilibrium → HIERARCHISTIC NATURALISM	Societal Normativity	Societal Morality	Societal Hierarchism
AMERICAN	Complex Flux → PRAGMATISM	Social Situational Normativity	Socially Responsive Morality	Evolving Natural Mental Social Selves

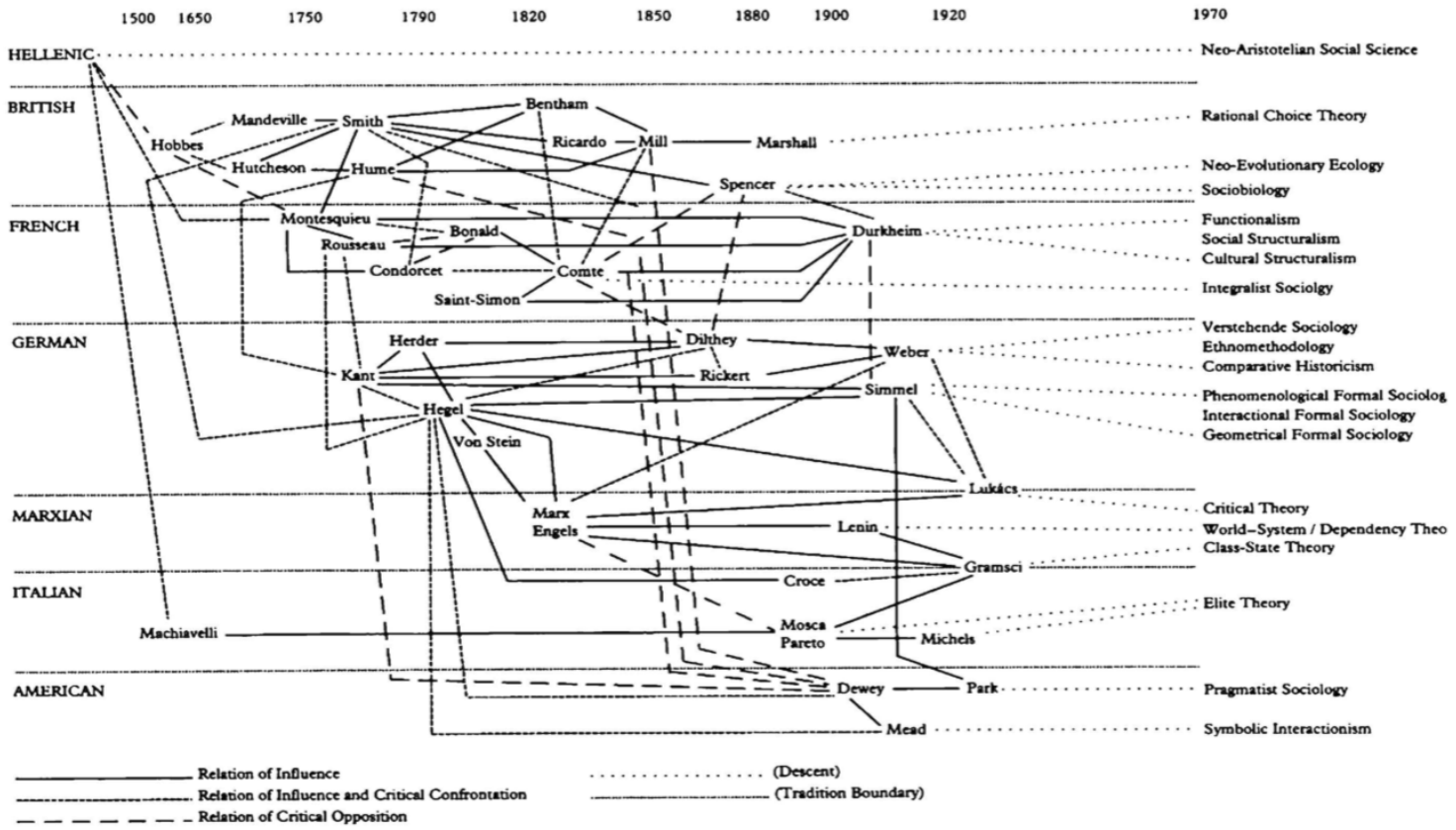

Figure 14. Major Dialogical Traditions in the Heritage of Sociology