

## Social Theory, Social Development, and Historiography

The Historical Background of Social Theory: Stories, Hypotheses, and Debates about the emergence of Modern Society

1. Two Stories, the "Endogenous" and the "Exogenous"
  - a. "Endogenous" means that the causal elements of the story are mainly "internal" to the system (the society). Society develops by an internal logic that unfolds or develops. By contrast, an "Exogenous" story means that the causal elements are "external" to the system (the society). External influences affect the development of the society.
  - b. Most of the theory we read in this class take an endogenous approach, though DuBois begins to introduce more exogenous elements. We find the endogenous story, with variations, in most of the theorists we read, especially conflict theorists like Adam Smith, Marx, and Weber, but also implicitly among functionalists like Spencer. DuBois follows much of this, but begins to introduce more "exogenous" elements as well.
  - c. Exogenous stories have been increasingly prominent in theory and history in the years after most of our theorists worked, including Lenin around WWI, and decolonizers after WWII, who began to introduce a variety of exogenous elements into accounts of Western and World development.
  - d. A useful recent book reviews the historical literature on world economic development and evaluates how many of the "classical" sociological theories stand up to current historical research: Mark Koyama and Jared T. Rubin, *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth*, Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022. Seeking to explain sustained economic growth (at the core of "modern" society), first in the West, and then in other regions of the world, they examine:
    - 1) Endogenous factors: Institutions, Culture, Demography, and Industrialization
    - 2) Exogenous factors: Geography, and Colonization and Exploitation
2. The Standard "Endogenous" Story (very oversimplified!)
  - a. Weber argues that most historical societies tended to be either tribal – small, decentralized, and comparatively egalitarian – or empires – large, centralized,

## Frederick Weil, Social Theory, Social Development, and Historiography

- powerful, and hierarchical. Empires lived by conquest and exploitation of the surplus of the peoples they conquered.
- b. According to this story, ancient Europe had been largely a tribal society, but was conquered by the Roman empire.
  - c. As the Roman empire lost power and slowly withdrew from Europe, the tribal chieftains harried the Roman legions out of their territory, but did not seek to pursue them back to Rome.
  - d. These tribal chieftains became the nobility or aristocracy of Europe. They practiced domination and exploitation of the population on a local scale. They maintained a military (knights) to defend themselves against neighboring aristocrats and to enforce domination and exploitation of the local population. The common people were peasants, and the economy was agrarian.
  - e. The aristocrats did not have the power to expand and centralize their power, so they remained local powers. But monarchs (kings and queens) arose among the aristocrats and wished to exert their power over the aristocrats, but were not militarily strong enough to do so. If they had succeeded, European society might have become an empire or a series of empires. Instead, it developed into feudalism, a semi-decentralized system very rare in world history.
  - f. Within feudal society, towns emerged. The townspeople began as impoverished artisans or traders who might set up shop at a crossroads, but they were subject to the depredations and raids of the aristocrats, who wanted to seize their surplus, just as they did with the peasants.
  - g. In time, the townspeople were able to erect town walls to protect themselves against the aristocrats and in order to keep more of their own surplus.
  - h. The monarchs began to form alliances with the towns to protect them against the aristocrats, under the principle that "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," and in return for a fixed tax. The fixed tax meant that the townspeople could strive to become more productive and more profitable, because they could keep this surplus for themselves. This is the important picture we get from Adam Smith and Weber of the tripartite interaction in feudal Europe of the Town-Crown alliance against the Aristocracy.
  - i. This arrangement was a standoff, and neither Smith nor Weber tell us why it ended. But it did eventually end with the victory of the Town-Crown alliance.

- j. This transition created the modern world. It had three major consequences.
    - 1) The Nation State. Under Absolutism, the monarchs were able to establish states (later, nation states), which were not large or strong enough to be empires, but which became very strong economically and militarily. Even when monarchs were later overthrown, the nation state survived, and it has become the dominant form of political organization in the world, displacing empires.
    - 2) Capitalism. The townspeople were able to extend trade among the towns, now that the countryside had become de-militarized, and they were able to expand their production, leading to manufacturing. This eventually gave rise to capitalism and great national wealth.
    - 3) Democracy. As part of their deal with the monarchies, the townspeople demanded and got the ability to govern themselves, and to have civil and economic freedoms. These rights grew into citizenship and democracy, were expanded, slowly or quickly, to other sectors of society.
  
  - k. This modern form of society became so rich and powerful, it was able to conquer other parts of the world. And other parts of the world also wanted to emulate this system. This modernism did spread, by conquest and emulation, and eventually, other parts of the world were able to compete effectively against Western societies. Thus, especially since the 1970s, Asian economies (e.g., Japan, South Korea, China) have outcompeted Western economies and have begun to spread their versions of modern models throughout the world. Their competition has also contributed to much deindustrialization of Western societies and the consequent social dislocations. We might be entering into newer phases of history, which will require new social theorizing.
  
  - l. Note: Koyama and Rubin cite recent literature that shows that Weber's thesis of a Protestant advantage in economic development is entirely accounted for by Protestants' higher levels of education – and that education also accounted for Jews' economic successes prior to, and since, the Protestant Reformation (see Maristella Botticini and Zvi Eckstein, *The Chosen Few: How Education Shaped Jewish History, 70-1492*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.)
3. A newer "Exogenous" Story (one among several, and also very oversimplified!)
- a. Since at least the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, there has been an exogenous story, largely built on older ideas of empire. The story is generally that European nations managed to become empires and seize and exploit the resources (including labor) of populations they conquered.

- b. Lenin's Marxian theory of "imperialism as the highest stage of capitalism" is one version of this. The decolonizing leaders of former European colonies after World War II presented other versions of these theories.
- c. Another, more nuanced, theory emerged, which centered especially on the system of sugar-producing slave plantations of the early modern period. I draw on three main sources for this story:
  - 1) Eric Williams book, *Capitalism and Slavery*. Williams came from Trinidad and Tobago, and went to Oxford for his PhD in economic history in the late 1930s. This was his dissertation, and was published in book form in the 1940s, while he was a professor at Howard University. He later returned to Trinidad and Tobago, became the first prime minister, and led decolonization and independence. He set the main thesis here. It has been much debated, and evaluations have gone back and forth.
  - 2) Sven Beckert's book, *Empire of Cotton*. Beckert is a Harvard history professor, and his 2014 book has been extremely influential.
  - 3) Howard French's 2021 book, *Born in Blackness: Africa, Africans, and the Making of the Modern World, 1471 to the Second World War*. French is a Black American, born in Virginia, who was a New York Times journalist, and is now a professor at Columbia; his wife is from Ghana. He was bureau chief for the NYT in Beijing and several African capitals, and he has written a number of books, including two about Chinese history.
  - 4) I have also learned a good deal from these recent books and articles:
    - a) Klein, Herbert S. 2010. *The Atlantic Slave Trade*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
    - b) Lindsay, Lisa A. 2008. *Captives as Commodities: The Transatlantic Slave Trade*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall.
    - c) Solow, Barbara L. 2014. *The Economic Consequences of the Atlantic Slave Trade*. Lanham: Lexington Books.
    - d) Stilwell, Sean Arnold. 2014. *Slavery and Slaving in African History*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
    - e) Heng, Geraldine. 2018. *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
    - f) Mark Koyama and Jared T. Rubin, *How the World Became Rich: The Historical Origins of Economic Growth*, Cambridge, UK ; Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2022.
    - g) Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution*. Polity Press, 2023
    - h) Ulbe Bosma, *The World of Sugar: How the Sweet Stuff Transformed Our Politics, Health, and Environment over 2,000 Years*, Harvard University Press, 2023 [I haven't read this one yet; it's in my queue]

- i) J.C. Sharman, Ayse Zarakol, "Global Slavery in the Making of States and International Orders," *American Political Science Review* (2024) 118, 2, 802–814
- d. This story, mostly taken from French, and building on Williams and Beckert, goes something like this (as always, oversimplified):
- e. Europe in the middle ages was poor, ignorant, and backward. Muslim and Asian societies of the time were more advanced.
- f. In 1325, Mansa Musa, Muslim emperor of the Malian empire, made a pilgrimage to Mecca. Mali had extensive gold mines, and Musa has been called the richest person in human history. Musa took a large caravan, with many slaves, with him on his pilgrimage, and gave away masses of gold, hoping to be recognized as a great leader. While he did not receive the recognition he sought, he did alert the world to the riches of gold in Mali.
  - 1) Slavery had existed in Africa since pre-historic times, in “low density” (mainly, household) and “high density” (mainly controlled by states/empires and estates) forms. While some have suggested that low density slavery was less harsh than high density slavery, it was still harsh, and slave status could be inherited across numerous generations, and slaves could even be killed in human sacrifice rituals.
  - 2) African slavery was spurred by external slave trading, initially with Muslims, across the Sahara and across the Indian Ocean, and later by the Atlantic slave trade. Muslims traded horses for slaves, and the Ghanaian, Malian, Songhai empires utilized the horses to conquer neighboring areas, taking slaves as they expanded. Mali also employed high density slave labor in its gold mines.
- g. Europe was too weak to compete for the Malian gold, especially not by the land routes through the Middle East and across the Sahara and Sahel. But Prince Henry the Navigator of Portugal decided to try for a sea route along the Atlantic coasts of Europe and Africa, which were largely unknown to Europeans at the time.
- h. The Portuguese were able to sail down the coast of West Africa, and after a while, around the Cape of Good Hope, up the east coast of Africa, to India, bypassing the land routes.
- i. The Portuguese eventually managed to establish an early 3-way trade system of certain European goods (e.g., metal pots and pans), Indian cotton fabrics, and African gold. And this attracted the interest and competition of other Atlantic-facing European countries like Spain, France, Britain, the Netherlands, and others.

- j. None of the European powers were strong enough to conquer African societies or even land without permission. Indeed, the Europeans were dependent on powerful Africans even for their provisions. The Portuguese did manage to get permission to build a fort on the coast of present-day Ghana in 1471, called Elmina ("the mine"), which later became a notorious slave-shipping post.
- k. As a side endeavor, the Portuguese established sugar-growing farms on the islands off of West Africa, the Azores, the Canaries, and especially Sao Tome. Sugar rapidly revealed itself as a highly desired cash crop, and the Portuguese expanded their operations to plantations employing African slave labor. The Portuguese made this labor system especially intensive and efficient, especially on Sao Tome, which led to widespread deaths among the slaves.
  - 1) Note that slave-based sugar plantations had already existed for centuries before the Portuguese, in the Eastern Mediterranean, largely under Muslim control. This earlier slave production was also high-density, intensively organized, and commercially oriented.
- l. Other European nations also noticed this slave-based sugar plantation economy and raced to either take it over or emulate it, especially after Columbus established sea routes to the Western hemisphere. Slave-based sugar plantations, later also with coffee, were established throughout the Caribbean and on the coast of present-day Brazil, and all major Atlantic-facing European countries competed here.
- m. The Sugar economy helped kick-start European economies, leading to the development of consumer markets, ship-building, finance and insurance, and also to the increase in navies and state power. European economies and states began to grow strong and rich.
- n. The European countries used more and more African slave labor, but they were still too weak to land on the African continent, so they obtained their slaves in trade with powerful Africans. It was not until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that European powers became strong enough to land on the African continent and control the lands, during a later stage of imperialism or colonialism. Yet by the time European colonialism gained power on the land in Africa, most European countries had banned the trans-Atlantic slave trade.
  - 1) Note that Europeans almost never captured slaves in Africa themselves, but rather, purchased them from powerful Africans who captured and enslaved other Africans. Some powerful Africans could and did refuse to sell slaves (even

though they might themselves practice slavery), and African sellers mostly demanded and got full market valuations, not trinkets.

- 2) During the Atlantic slave trade, Europeans also had to depend on African rulers for rights to dock, build fortresses, hold slaves for transport, as well as for food and provisions. Europeans did not gain power to decisively control things till late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and decolonization after World War II again reduced their power over African societies.
  - 3) African slavery actually expanded after the Western abolition of the slave trade in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and lasted into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. There were generally as many slaves in Africa as in the Americas, and the percentage of enslaved people in Africa could reach 20-50% in some regions at some times. Most aspects of slavery in Africa are highly variable – and highly debated – but slavery in Africa was a major feature of its history.
- o. The sugar plantation owners became incredibly rich, protected by European mercantilist policies and navies, and flanked by privateers and pirates, who also sometimes became planters. The plantation owners began to return to their home countries and engage in domestic economy and politics, sometimes becoming absentee owners, sending managers to engage in increasingly brutal labor practices on the plantations.
    - 1) Barbara Solow and others argue that slave plantations drove the economic development of the Americas. European elites never succeeded in inducing sufficient numbers of free Europeans to settle in the Americas. And with the availability of vast amounts of land (at the expense of indigenous peoples), American landowners could never induce Europeans to work for wages when they could homestead. American yeoman small farmers were basically subsistence farmers, producing little for markets or driving economic development. It took coercive slave labor to produce enough export goods to drive economic development; and even non-slave regions like New England largely developed by providing slave regions with slaves, production goods, and markets.
  - p. However, sugar production tended to exhaust the fertility of the land, meaning the planters had to find new islands or mainland locations for their plantations. Also, increased production worldwide began to lead to a glut of sugar and an overall collapse of prices.
  - q. At this point, Eric Williams argues, mechanization of cotton spinning and weaving begins to emerge in Manchester, Britain, and the enormously wealthy sugar planters

- as well as the increasing wealthy general economy – begin investing in cotton mills. Beckert also takes up the story here.
- r. Sugar planters had attempted to expand to North America, especially around South Carolina and Louisiana. But sugar production did not work as well there, so planters turned to rice and then cotton, still using slave labor.
  - s. Paradoxically, Williams and to a lesser extent Beckert, argue that even though the demand for cotton for the mills was increasing, and production in the America South was increasing, the mills became more and more able to source cotton from all over the world, including India, the Middle East, and China. Thus, Williams and Beckert argue that slave production of cotton became less and less economically necessary and viable.
  - t. Cotton fabric production also became so profitable, that the British and also New Englanders began to turn away from mercantilism and toward free trade, because nobody else could compete with them.
  - u. Given these factors, Britain began to turn away from the slave trade and slave production, and outlawed it in 1807. The American South continued slave production till the Civil War (and Cuba and Brazil still longer), but to their surprise, their cotton production actually increased after Emancipation. Initially, it is thought (cf. DuBois) that this was due to Jim Crow measures like share-cropping and convict labor, which attempted to reintroduce slave labor by other means. But the rest of the U.S. was establishing mechanized agriculture after the Civil War, and it was very productive. The Southern planters resisted mechanization until the Great Migration caused them to lose their Black work force, and they were forced to turn to mechanization – and actually experienced another increase in productivity without as oppressive labor practices.
  - v. Thus, this story suggests that:
    - 1) Slave-plantation sugar production directly and indirectly revolutionized European economies and states, hugely increasing their wealth and power.
    - 2) This new capital was reinvested in industrialization, which accelerated the growth of Western wealth and power, and led to a turning away from mercantilism and a reliance on slave labor.
    - 3) By this time, cotton could be sourced from everywhere in the world, and slave production was no longer economically "necessary," but it still continued in the American South till it was ended by the Civil War. And while oppressive labor practices continued through the Jim Crow era, mechanization also showed that these practices were also economically "unnecessary." In fact, these practices



probably held back Southern economic development for a century after the Civil War. We might need another explanation for these practices: if not for economic reasons, perhaps for reasons of political power.

- w. Not all theorists and historians endorse this version of the "exogenous" story. While the story may have internal coherence, recent historical research summarized by Koyama and Rubin shows that:
- 1) Other historical empires (Egyptians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans, Mongols, Muslims) did not produce sustained economic growth. They simply stole goods and people (slaves) from one place and moved them to their imperial centers. Sustained economic growth did not take hold until it began in modern Western societies, whether for endogenous or exogenous reasons. In fact, it was only Britain, with industrialization, that first broke through to sustained economic growth, not the other European powers, though they also built empires; they only caught up later by following Britain's path.
  - 2) Williams' thesis, that profits from slave-plantation sugar production provided the start-up capital for industrial development, has not stood up well to historical evidence. (a) Most of the start-up capital for industrial production came from small inventors and craftsmen in the North of England not connected to the centers of capital in London or Liverpool. (b) Sugar-based capital was a small part of the British economy, and like cotton profits, it soon declined due to overproduction from around the world.
  - 3) Beckert's thesis, that it was cotton, also falls short for many of the same reasons. (a) As we have seen, and Beckert agrees, slavery was not economically "necessary" for producing cotton profits: other regions without slavery also produced profits, and profits did not fall in the American South after Emancipation. (b) The price of cotton fell, like sugar prices, due to world overproduction. Textile mill owners could source cotton world-wide, without having to rely on slave production. (c) Cotton production did not drive the US economy, either during slavery or afterwards: cotton exports accounted for less than 6% of the US economy. (d) Cotton production actually held back economic development in the American South, during slave times and for a century after. Again, the plantation owners got rich and maintained their own political power at the expense of the region and the whole of America.
- x. It should also be noted that by, say, the period of industrialization, or at the latest, by the end of WWII, or perhaps the rise of Asian economies around the 1970s, the "endogenous" and "exogenous" stories largely dovetail. The "endogenous" story accepts that international domination took place after Western modern societies emerged; and the "exogenous" story suggests that these practices always existed. And both stories speculate that the age of Western dominance could be coming to

an end, but that Asian societies may also begin to practice forms of global domination.

y. The question of Racism.

- 1) Eric Williams argues that racism did not cause slavery, but the reverse: that slavery caused racism. Africans were easier to identify than indentured Europeans, who were often treated just as badly. If either tried to escape, it was easier to identify the Africans.
- 2) Williams' colleague at Howard University, Frank Snowden, makes a parallel argument in his book, *Before Color Prejudice, The Ancient View of Blacks* (1983). Snowden argues that Europeans noticed the difference between themselves and Africans, but they didn't feel that this caused important differences between the groups.
- 3) The argument that the 1492 Expulsion from Spain caused racism. Ferdinand and Isabella ordered Jews and Muslims to leave Spain or convert to Christianity. Many left, and some converted, but some said they converted but continued to secretly practice their religion. The Inquisition then developed the idea that all conversions were insincere, and that "blood" or race prevented Jews or Muslims from becoming true Christians. Some have argued that this is the true source of "scientific" or "genetic" racism.
  - a) Geraldine Heng has recently argued (*The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages*, 2018) that racism in Europe can be traced back to medieval times – but still beginning by considering Jews to be hereditary outsiders.

z. Sugar and civil society.

- 1) Some have argued (e.g., Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* [1962]) that sugar and coffee directly transformed European society.
- 2) They were consumer commodities and helped created consumer markets, a component of capitalism
- 3) Cafes partly displaced bars. And thus, stimulants (coffee, sugar) partly displaced depressants (alcohol). This contributed to greater energy and productivity, an important component of capitalism.
- 4) Just as importantly, cafes became gathering points for discussion and debate.
  - a) Prior to this, debate could take place within the Church or the Church-controlled University, or within aristocratic salons.
  - b) The scope of debate was definitely limited within the pre-modern Church or University.
  - c) The aristocratic salons are credited with being an important source of Enlightenment thinking, but aristocratic sponsorship may have also limited the scope of debate somewhat.

- d) By contrast, cafes were gathering spots for lay commoners and may thus have contributed to the emergence of bourgeois civil society and bourgeois intellectuals, who produced competing worldviews in contrast to Church or aristocratic worldviews.
- e) Later worldviews emerged in similar environments, but were critical of bourgeois ideology. These might include labor, anti-colonial, race/ethnic minority, feminist, LGBTQ+, and other perspectives.
- 5) Thus, some have argued that sugar and coffee – and cafes based on them – represent the turning point from “traditional” to “modern” sources of consumer society, increased productivity, and social theory production.
- 6) However, others are skeptical of this thesis. See the evidence summarized by Koyama and Rubin, above. They argue that sugar production was just one of many factors, and not necessarily the largest of them, and that sugar production by other historical empires did not lead to sustained economic growth.

This draft: August 2024

### *Addendum*

New literature is coming out on Western development at an accelerating rate, especially the “exogenous” story. I’ll put a few notes about new literature here, and maybe from time to time, I’ll work my notes into the main body of the lecture.

- Maxine Berg and Pat Hudson, *Slavery, Capitalism and the Industrial Revolution*. Polity Press, 2023. The authors, respected economic historians specializing in the industrial revolution in Britain, seek to buttress the Eric Williams thesis, arguing that slavery was a much more important factor in Western economic development than has been given credit for, especially for the industrial revolution. They present a wealth of detailed information and data and provide an extensive review of recent literature. However, though they present bottom-line evaluations of the long-term harm slavery has done to descendants of slaves and to Africa and colonial areas, they decline to provide a bottom-line evaluation of how important slavery was to Western development. This has frustrated more than one reviewer, and it leaves unanswered several of the central questions raised above:
  - What was, in fact, slavery’s impact on Western development, even at a ballpark level?
  - Slavery and empire have existed in so many societies. Why did sustained economic growth only emerge in Western societies, beginning with Britain, and only after slavery had ended? And why Britain, when other European countries (France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands) had as large or larger slave-based economic sectors?

## Frederick Weil, Social Theory, Social Development, and Historiography

- More generally, though the authors explore the connection between slavery and other sectors that were important for economic development – finance, the state, the military, manufacturing, especially textiles, a consumer market, among others – they don't evaluate how strong a causal impact. If slavery had a "multiplier effect," how big was it?
  - European slavery was part of the mercantilist system and did not survive the end of mercantilism. How much did slavery actually affect the emergence and operation of the free market system that came after mercantilism?
- These factors are going to need to be debated and evaluated more fully before we can say that anything like a consensus exists.
- A new book came out in 2023, which I am about to read: Ulbe Bosma, *The World of Sugar: How the Sweet Stuff Transformed Our Politics, Health, and Environment over 2,000 Years*, Harvard University Press, 2023. This looks to be as ambitious a world history as Beckert's book on cotton.
- I recently read a book, Benjamin Reilly, *Slavery, Agriculture, and Malaria in the Arabian Peninsula*, Ohio University Press, 2015, which explores plantation chattel slavery, using enslaved Africans, in the Arabian peninsula, in a period somewhat coterminous with the Atlantic slave trade. This was large-scale industrial slavery, carried out in malarial oasis areas, where Arab workers could not/would not work. Reilly notes, as did Bernard Lewis, that even though there are detailed archives of the Ottoman Empire that cover this practice, those archives have been closed to scholars. The societies of Muslim empires were largely urban, and the largely unexplored question is who provided the urban dwellers with food in the centuries after the slave revolts of the 10<sup>th</sup> century around Basra seemingly ended the slave-labor plantation economies of that time.
- A major article on the comparative history of slavery, especially comparing European and Islamic slavery, came out in early 2024: J.C. Sharman, Ayse Zarakol, "Global Slavery in the Making of States and International Orders," *American Political Science Review* (2024) 118, 2, 802–814, authored by two professors of international relations at the University of Cambridge, England. They show the different uses slavery was put to in state/empire formation and emerging economic structures. In doing so, they also seek to contextualize the dominant trans-Atlantic focus in most Western scholarship. "When slavery is discussed, it is almost always in terms of a very partial and incomplete picture of the trans-Atlantic trade that foregrounds the role of Americans and Europeans while neglecting Africa [and other regions, including the Middle East]. Recent growing public interest in questions of race and slavery in the United States and elsewhere in the West, while welcome and overdue, also tend to mirror and accentuate the same long-standing biases in scholarship." (812)