

## **Building Sociological Theory in the Global South: Problems and Prospects**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper explores the historical and contemporary status of sociological theory in the global south. In doing so, it examines three research questions. First, what social forces did contribute to making, remaking, or ending sociological theory in the global north? Next, what societal factors did impede the development of sociological theory in the global south? Third, how can sociologists in the global south build sociological theory? This article surveys northern sociological theories best known to date to examine the first question. In particular, it explores the complete trajectories (their birth, development, and crisis) of two grand theories in northern sociology called Functionalism and Marxism. In investigating the second and third research questions, this paper traces the historical status of southern sociological theory by surveying the extant sociological literature from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It deploys historical and comparative methodological approaches to scrutinize the global literature on sociological theory. One of the article's central findings is that while northern sociological theories emerged, expanded, and ended due to the structural necessities of northern societies, southern sociological theories were unseen because of the absence of such needs in southern societies. Another finding shows that although southern sociology lacks sociological theory, it may produce new sociological theory by drawing on indigenous philosophies, postcolonial studies, and emerging global realities. Overall, this study critically examines the theoretical trajectories in western sociology and the challenges and possibilities of theory building in southern sociology.*

**Keywords:** Sociological Theory, Theory Building, Western Sociology, Southern Sociology, Functionalism, Marxism, Asia, Africa and Latin America.

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### Introduction

This study<sup>1</sup> investigates the historical and contemporary status of sociological theory in the global south<sup>2</sup>. In doing so, the article examines three research questions. First, what social forces did contribute to making, remaking, or ending sociological theory in the global north? Next, what societal factors did impede the development of sociological theory in the global south? Third, how can sociologists in the global south develop sociological theory? To examine these questions, this paper surveys northern sociological theories best known to date. In particular, I follow the trajectories (their birth, development, and crisis) of the two most influential northern sociological theories called Marxism and Functionalism. The article also traces the historical status of southern sociological theory by inspecting the extant global literature<sup>3</sup>. It deploys historical and comparative methodological approaches to scrutinize the literature on global sociological theories.

This study has several key findings. First, the paper shows that northern sociological theories emerged, developed, and declined due to the internal demands of northern societies. However, the article explores that southern sociologists still need to trace such needs that could produce new theories in southern sociology. In all cases, southern sociologists used “ready-made” northern sociological theories to understand their societies. Southern sociology, more particularly South Asian sociology, lacks indigenous sociological theories for several reasons. I explore nine such reasons for South Asia. These included (1) long-lasting agrarian practice, (2) oral epistemological tradition, (3) lack of systematic

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1. The idea of this article originated from a theory course paper (*The Status of Sociological Theory in Non-Western Societies*) at Virginia Tech in 2016. Later, I reworked the article in June 2023 to give a public lecture for the Nazmul Karim Study Centre at the University of Dhaka. I further revised the paper by incorporating valuable feedback from the discussants/audiences and the reviewers to submit it to the *Journal of Sociology*.
  2. Here, the global south refers to non-western societies (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), and the global north denotes western societies (primarily Western Europe and North America). In this paper, I use northern sociology to refer to western sociology and southern sociology to indicate non-western sociology.
  3. This article is part of an ongoing book project and is still confined to the literature survey. I plan to collect primary evidence from 20 selected countries of the three continents (Asia, Africa, and Latin America), using the International Sociological Association’s list of 43 non-western nations with robust sociology programs. I will interview 50 prominent sociologists from those sampled countries. Additionally, I will conduct a short survey to collect data from a wide range of theory stakeholders from northern and southern countries.

philosophy and generalization, (4) absence of social reformative and technological revolution, (5) despotic formation of the intellectuals, (6) the land of hybridized worldview, (7) dependent industrialization and urbanization, (8) displaced epistemology in society and academia, and (9) epistemological fault lines in the knowledge system.

This article offers six guidelines for building sociological theories in the global south, particularly in South Asia. The prescriptions are as follows. First, South Asian sociologists may build on local philosophical schools to develop macro<sup>4</sup> sociological theory. This practice is found in how Marx drew on Hegelian philosophy, Durkheim on British empiricism, and Weber on Kantian philosophy. Next, South Asian sociologists may draw on the critical insights of contemporary postcolonial studies to build sociological theory to explain northern and south societies and their historical connections. Third, they may integrate all forms of southern and northern Marxist traditions<sup>5</sup> to frame a unified Marxist sociological theory. Next, they may work on developing middle-range theories, as suggested by Merton (1968), based on local or global empirical evidence. Fifth, they may produce new ideas to understand the emerging AI-dominated society or AI capitalism. Lastly, South Asian sociologists may study the relationship between human society and the universe, knowing about the current trend of commodification and privatization of space or space capitalism.

The rest of the paper consists of four sections. In the next section, I will discuss the significant traditions of northern sociological theories that emerged to explain western societies. The following section will identify major obstacles to producing sociological theories in southern societies. The fourth section will offer insights into the possibility of developing sociological theories in southern societies, including South Asia. The last section will hold a concluding comment on the paper.

### **Sociological Theory in The Global North: Origin, Development and Crisis**

We all know that sociology—a specialized branch of knowledge that systematically studies human society—emerged in the western world due to significant social forces, such as the Renaissance, Enlightenment,

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4. I cast doubt on postmodern or poststructural ideas regarding the end of grand theories. Like Wallerstein (1997, 2001), Burawoy (2007, 2011), and Ritzer (2011), I believe that a serious intellectual effort by a passionate group of scholars can build new grand theories in sociology. I also posit that each society has its own theory, but some people need to be there to discover it.

5. I find at least 11 Marxist traditions listed in the subsection on Marxism.

French Revolution, Reformation Movement, Industrial Revolution, and The United States Bill of Rights. These forces brought massive social changes to western societies. The formal father of this discipline—often credited to French historian of science August Comte—was heavily attracted by these changes. Comte felt the demand for a new science to explain the changing western world. He created this new discipline by drawing primarily on the ideas of the socialist intellectual traditions of France. He labeled the discipline as a new religion of human society—a religion that would produce systematic knowledge to understand societies in order to maintain social order and peace. Comte's major contribution to sociology is his positivist approach to studying social order (i.e., social statics) and social changes (i.e., social dynamics). He deployed historical, comparative, and observational methods to study such social phenomena.

Contemporary to Comte, Herbert Spencer came with an evolutionist approach to interpreting society, powerfully showing how societal communities and institutions (or social organs) evolve from simple to complex entities. Later, three major sociologists appeared with their theoretical perspectives to explain modern capitalist society: Karl Marx with his positivist/conflict approach, Weber with his historical/interactionist approach, and Durkheim with his positivist/functionalist approach. Together, we see five major traditions<sup>6</sup> of classical sociological theory: positivist, evolutionist, functionalist, conflict, and interactionist. These schools of thought primarily drew the massive attention of European and American scholars to understand their societies. Although European sociologists dominated the discipline up to the 1920s, they were less successful in institutionalizing sociology as an academic discipline. American sociologists did the job with great success after the 1920s. In particular, American sociologists revitalized the discipline by studying American cities and city life from the evolutionist and functionalist perspectives.

Due to the Russian Revolution, WWI, and the Great Depression, American sociology heavily concentrated on the functionalist approach. This approach soon became synonymous with Academic Sociology in the USA (Gouldner 1970). However, Marxism became a prominent school of thought in the Soviet Union and the colonial world. The eventual outcome was the appearance of two most competing sociological schools of thought in global sociology: functionalism—or

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6. In an elaboration, we see at least ten reputed theoretical perspectives (from positivist to structuration) produced by sociologists of different northern countries, such as France, Germany, Italy, the UK, the USA, and Canada, and of different generations, from Comte to Parsons to Giddens.

Academic Sociology, and Marxism—or a school of thought for political parties and organic intellectuals. In the following, I will discuss the origin, development, and crises of these two schools by reflecting on some critical works, including Marx’s original writings, Neo-Marxist scholarship, and Gouldner’s (1970) seminal piece on the coming crisis in the western sociological theory.

### ***Functionalism and Its Life Cycle as A Grand Sociological Theory***

Functionalism gained its status as a grand theory in sociology mainly through the writings of American sociologist Talcott Parsons (1937, 1951, 1964, 1967, 1971, 1977, 1978, 1979). This theory traced its origin to early English anthropology. Later, it gained more strength by engaging with the writings of Durkheim (1964) and Weber (1961, 1978). In the 1930s, Parsons built on these earlier intellectual traditions to build his own theoretical canon. He offered a robust theorization on understanding social systems: how society can maintain its order and how to produce social equilibrium in social systems. As such, early Parsonian functionalist theory rested on analyzing social systems and their roles in maintaining social order. Parsons did so to preserve stability in American or global society, making progress towards a better and prosperous world after the crisis of the great depression.

Due to WWII, international communist threats, and decolonial movements in the 1940s and 1950s, Parsons changed his social system theory by adding the role of the state<sup>7</sup> in maintaining social order. He advocated a welfare state system regulating the market and performing welfare activity. He then saw the state as the “master source of power.” This welfare system had put a lot of money into social science research, popularizing Academic Sociology (or Functionalism) all across American universities. Parsons<sup>8</sup> even assisted the government in making new education bills to increase funding and opportunities for social scientists. One example showed that public money for social science research increased from 118 million in 1960 to 200 million in 1964 (Gouldner 1970). Then, dozens of applied social science programs appeared at university levels. Parsons’ colleagues also began developing three new action research theories: decision-making, cybernetics, and operation research. They also suggested offering social statistics courses all across social science programs. This time sociologists began reading more about economics than ever before. Heightened government pressure on social

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7. In his earlier theory, he shows no role of the state in maintaining social order.

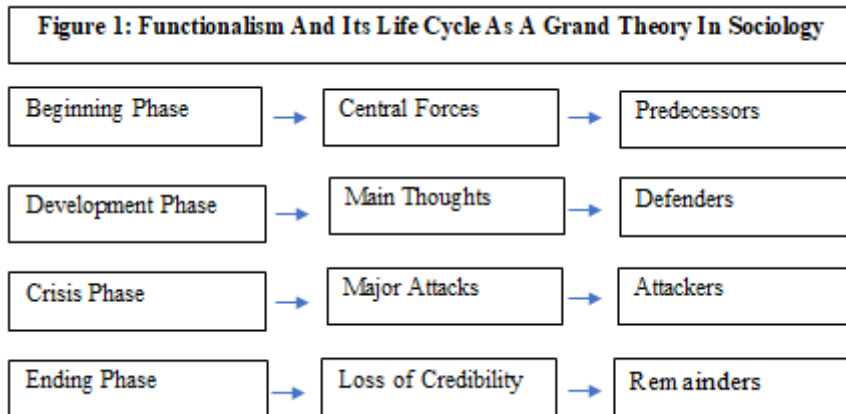
8. Parsons and his colleagues at Harvard also provided vital guidelines to the US state to modernize southern societies.

scientists forced sociologists to study social problems (rather than doing theory) to find solutions. The government launched “War on Poverty” campaign to discourage becoming poor and punish the poor. The Sociology of Poverty course was then offered by hundreds of universities. Gouldner (1970) called this state project a “sociological version of Keynesianism!” During this time, a nationwide survey of sociologists explored that some 80% of American sociologists showed “favorable disposed toward functional theory” (Gouldner 1970). What a successful theory!

Earlier, Parsons explained that every sub-system has its own internal mechanisms to address emerging social tensions, keeping social stability intact in the greater social system. However, this theory faced a severe crisis during the 1960s when the civil rights movement, student movement (New Left), feminist movement, urban riots, and Vietnam War destabilized the American and global order. This time a further modification of his theory was needed. As such, he added a powerful concept to his theory called “dysfunction” (Radcliff Brown originally developed this idea). He also returned to Spencer’s concept of “social differentiation” to explain the tensions in the American social order. A “seed group” of functionalism also appeared to save the functionalist approach from the emerging threat created by the New Left of young Marx, conflict theorists, and scholars of the critical school. Merton then came up with an updated theory to defend functionalism by exploring two functions of a social action (manifest and latent), offering a functionalist theory of crime and deviance, and creating the idea of middle-range theory—a shift from a grand theory with a world hypothesis to a middle range theory with empirical support. Some other functionalists (e.g., K. Davis, W. Moore, and A. Inkless) also came forward to save Academic Sociology. Some functionalists even took the Marxist perspective to defend functionalism—Gouldner (1970) saw it as a convergence between functionalism and Marxism.

Continued attacks on functionalist theory came from other powerful fronts. Such as C.W. Mills’ (1956) theory of power elites, E. Goffman’s (1957) dramaturgical analysis of social action, R. Dahrendorf’s (1959) neo-Marxist analysis of the capital and class, Smelser’s (1959) general theory of social change, G. Homans’ (1961) and P. Blau’s (1964) exchange theory, Garfinkel’s (1967) idea of ethnomethodology, and New Left’s radical idea of social reformation. All these theoretical fronts value “social change” over the Parsonian model of “social order.” Then the New Left—the “growing radicalization of the students” primarily based on Columbia University and UC Berkeley —were even ready to go to jail for their thoughts against functionalism. The defenders of functionalism deeply felt these threats against their ideas. Parsons then declared that

developing a “complete” or “general” theory in social science is not always possible. Here I show (Figure 1) the colorful life cycle of functionalism from the beginning to the end.



***Marxism and Its Life Cycle as A Grand Sociological Theory***

Marxism is another case examining how a grand sociological theory emerged, flourished, and declined. Many scientists and social thinkers influenced Marx’s ideas. However, in most cases, he modified their thoughts to build new theories. In Table 1, I summarize how Marx drew on numerous scholars to build his ideas (1853a, 1853b, 1867, 1894, 1961, 1963, 1964, 1970, 1977).

Table 1: Theoretical Roots of Marx’s Ideas		
Approaches	Key Thinkers	Karl Marx
Philosophical Approach	Aristotle: Aristotelian logic and empiricism.	Marxian logic: Truth (appearance) and real are different.
	Vico: Constructivist epistemology: Truth itself is fact, or the truth itself is made.	Distinction between true and real; make duality between facts.
	Hegel: Dialectical idealism (extension of the method of reasoning by Kant).	Dialectical materialism; Subject and object are dialectically interlinked.
	Feuerbach: Religious idealism- God is superior to humans,	Historical materialism; <sup>9</sup> notion of alienation: Inspired

9. Marx summarized the materialistic aspect of his theory of history in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1970 [1859]): “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations

	though human made their God.	by Feuerbach’s critique of the alienation of humans from God; religion for oppression.
	Rousseau: Inequality: natural and social; inequality as a major cause of social injustice.	The ultimate goal of capitalism is to create and sustain social disparities.
	Spinoza: Theory of the universe: Freedom and free will of humans that comes from God.	Marx was inspired by Spinoza’s account of the universe, interpreting it as a materialistic idea.
	Robespierre: Key proponent of the French Revolution.	Marx was inspired by Robespierre and took an egalitarian philosophy for humanity.
Economic Approach	Epicurus: Atomism and materialism: The world is ultimately based on the motions and interactions of atoms moving in empty space.	Capital is a process having the principle of motion; capital is the unit of analysis of the capitalist world order.
	Locke: Theory of property: Most of the value of a product comes through work (90 percent comes from work and 10 percent from natural resources).	However, Marx showed that 100 percent of value comes from work (or human labor power).
	Adam Smith: Invisible hand: Individual selfish endeavor creates greater welfare for society- a general capital accumulation system.	Marx’s invisible hand: Individual benevolence creates social welfare; Marx’s idea of primitive accumulation is an upgrade of Smith’s general accumulation system.
	Locke and Ricardo: The labor theory of value.	Marx’s modification: A commodity consists of three things: value, use-value, and exchange-value; commodity fetishism- a mysterious character of a commodity that resembles dead labor power of humans (or a fetish figure).

of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness”.



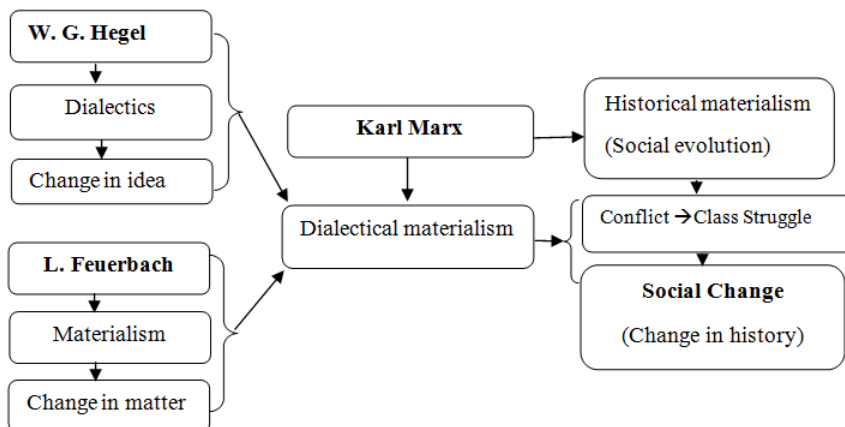
Political Approach	Vico: The class struggle is a condition of a society that can make a relatively egalitarian society (though he posited that complete equality would lead to chaos and a breakdown in society).	Marx was fundamentally influenced by Vico's socialist ideas: Overthrowing unequal capitalist system to create an egalitarian socialist/ communist system.
	Robert Owen: Founder of utopian socialism and the cooperative movement.	The notion of surplus value and alienation; social change through class struggle.
	Proudhon and Saint Simon: Utopian socialism.	Marx (with Engels) reversed their ideas into scientific socialism.
	Lorenz Von Stein: The concept of the proletariat and class struggle, but no revolution.	The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggles.
	Moses Hess <sup>10</sup> : Humans created history through their active consciousness; religion as the "opiate of the people."	Marx was able to convert the Hegelian dialectical theory of history into dialectical materialism with the help of Hess; religion is the opium of the people.
	Fourier: Human-emanicipation through struggle; new world order based on unity of action and harmonious collaboration.	Theory of class struggle: the victory of the proletariat over the bourgeois when they are united; unite all the workers of the world.
	Biblical humanism: Justice.	Human emancipation from capitalist repression.
Evolutionary Approach	Voltaire: Freedom of religion, freedom of expression, separation of church and state, and historiography- scientific ways to look at the past.	A scientific framework for explaining human history by the materialistic notion; linear progression of human societies.

10. Moses Hess's (1846) words on Marx: "Here is a phenomenon who has made an enormous impression on me although I work in the same field. In short prepare to meet the greatest, perhaps the only genuine philosopher now living who will soon have the eyes of all Germany upon him wherever he may appear in public, whether in print or on the rostrum. Dr. Marx, as my idol is called, is still quite a young man (aged about 24 at most) and it is he who will give medieval religion and politics their coup de grace, he combines a biting wit with deeply serious philosophical thinking. Imagine Rousseau, Voltaire, Holbach, Lessing, Heine and Hegel combined into one person—and I say combined, not blended—and there you have Dr. Marx."

	Morgan: Societal typologies.	The framework for social evolution: From primitive communism, slavery, Asiatic society, feudalism, socialism to communism.
	Darwin: Evolution in a linear way.	Social change in a linear way
Approach To Human Psychology, Labor Power	Shakespeare: Human behavior-rational vs. emotional; kind vs. brutal.	Capitalist society: Progressive, brutal, and ruthless.
	Goethe: Duality in the soul.	Duality in value: Use-value vs. exchange-value; duality in materialistic consciousness: freedom vs. alienation.

By critically drawing on his predecessors, Marx developed some crucial theories: the theory of social evolution, the theory of scientific socialism (along with Engels), the theory of capitalist accumulation, the labor theory of value, the theory of surplus value, the theory of capital, the theory of class, the theory of the state, the theory of the capitalist ideology, and the theory of social change (see Figure 2). Scholars have merged these theories into a grand theory of modern capitalism—i.e., Marxism. Marxism came into practice (with distortion) in the Soviet Union, led by political groups and parties. Lenin was the first prominent Marxist scholar who put Marx’s ideas into practice (i.e., praxis) to make a successful (arguably) Socialist Revolution to build a communist empire.

Figure 2: Marx’s Theory of Social Change— An Analytical Model



After Marx and Lenin, Marxism as a grand theory continued to extend its boundary when scholars from all over the world contributed to Marxist

thoughts—either through critiquing/ altering Marx’s views, rejecting Marx’s ideas, or offering new theories. These groups are identified as Classical (orthodox/vulgar) Marxists, Radical Marxists, Critical Marxists, Structural Marxists, Neo-Marxists, Cultural Marxists, New Left, Analytical Marxists, Libertarian Marxists, Feminist Marxists, and Post-Marxists. In this paper (Figures 3-6), I briefly outline the central contributions of four renowned Neo-Marxists<sup>11</sup>—who offer influential ideas of both social change and social stability (or no change) under the advanced phase of western capitalism.

**Figure 3: A. Gramsci— An Independent Marxist**

**Theory of no change:** Late capitalism → control over capital, state, and ideology → fascism → new forms of domination or hegemony → no element of opposition → no struggle → **no change** (Gramsci 1971:53-57).

**Theory of change:** Late capitalism → deprivation → conscientization through education, organic intellectuals, and civil society → catharsis- lived experience of the workers → counter hegemony → historical block/strategic alliance → breaking down ruling class hegemony → organizational ideology → revolution or ideological struggle → **social change** (Gramsci 1971:56-59).

**Figure 4: G. Lukács— An Independent Marxist**

**Theory of no change:** Late capitalism → welfare state/state capitalism (Keynesian model) → consumer goods → false needs → false consciousness → reification → [propelled class consciousness] → no struggle → **no change** (Lukács 1923:39-47).

**Theory of change** (Lukács): Imputed class consciousness (by communist party and civil society) → praxis → proletarian epistemology → proletarian class consciousness → revolution → **social change** (Lukács 1923:51-53).

**Figure 5: H. Marcuse— Hegelian Marxist**

**Theory of no change:** Advanced industrial capitalism → automation and enslavement → flexibility in work and mass consumerism → false needs → shared the same world → socio-cultural integration → repressive or institutionalized desublimation → rise of one-dimensional man and culture → no movement → **no change** (Marcuse 1964:24-57).

**Theory of change:** Advanced industrial capitalism → rise of instrumental reason and technological rationality → greater domination over man → Ambiguity (because of conflicting tendencies, forces of freedom and social cohesion) → repression and deprivation for unhappy consciousness → breakdown one-dimensional culture → revolution → **social change**-*progressive, regressive and cyclical* (Marcuse 1964: 57-76).

11. I first became aware of these Neo-Marxist theories of change and no change while studying a course in the MS program at the University of Dhaka with Professor Mahbub Uddin Ahmed. I later read those scholars’ original texts and used their ideas in my teaching and writing.

**Figure 6: R. Dahrendorf— An Analytical Marxist**

**Theory of no change:** Advanced industrial capitalism → decomposition of capital and labor → distribution of capital between owners and non-owners → sense of belongingness → lack of leaders and ideologies → emergence of new social classes → relative participation in decision making → relative deprivation (instead of absolute one) → emergence of the disassociated institutional norms → disappearance of class conflict → no movement → **no change.** (Dahrendorf 1959:241-248).

**Theory of change:** Advanced industrial capitalism → decomposition of capital and labor → workers as owners of capitals through stock → conflict between big owners and petty owners → imbalance in authority → new patterns of class conflict → potential class war → (small scale) **social change** (Dahrendorf 1959:241-248).

Marxism has faults; thus, it has faced numerous attacks and crises throughout its journey since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Some scholars declared the death of Marxism after the fall of the Soviet Union. However, most of its ideas are still valuable for scholars of new generations and this contemporary world. New theorization on Marxism is continually being observed in various fields of knowledge in social science and humanities. A life cycle of a grand theory—e.g., Marxism—in social science never ends<sup>12</sup>, as it is observed by T. Kuhn (1962). Its utility remains forever for human society.

**Problems Of Building Sociological Theory in The Global South**

Southern sociologists have deployed or modified many western sociological theories throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to explain their societies. Most of their efforts have remained confined to offering new analyses of their societies, but they could not develop any comprehensive sociological theory parallel to western one. A brief discussion on such atheoretical sociological tradition in southern societies is placed below.

The first sociological practice can be traced back outside the west in 1854 in the writings of Argentinian sociologist D. F. Sarmiento (Gibert 1952:128, 131). However, sociology as an academic discipline in Argentina began its formal journey in 1896. Since the mid-1890s,

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12. While some sociologists are worried about the crisis in sociological theory (Gouldner 1970; Siedman 1994; Stinchcombe 1994; Denzin 1995; Abbott 2000; Turner 2006; Islam 2005; Szelenyi 2015), other sociologists are hopeful (with cautions!) for the new theorization of global societies (Wallerstein 1997, 2001; Burawoy 2007, 2016; Ritzer 2011; Islam 2005; Islam 2010).

sociology has reached Brazil, Mexico, Chile, Cuba, and other Latin American countries. Between the 1890s and 1960s, sociology was vibrant in Latin America. However, scholars observed a “sociological syncretism” in this region instead of new theorization (Gibert 1952). After the 1960s, Latin American sociology turned its attention to studying internationalism (Tavares-dos-Santos and Baumgarten 2006), postcolonialism (Bortoluci and Jansen 2013), and developmentalism (Faille 2013). However, these views never gained the status of a sociological theory.

Sociology reached South Africa in 1903, and the first sociology course was taught at the University of Cape Town in 1919 (Magubane 2000; Jubber 2007). Some scholars contributed to sociology by studying poverty and racial discrimination using western sociological theories (Wagner 1938, 1939; Irving 1958; Cilliers 1982). However, they failed to produce any significant sociological theory (Jubber 2007). In post-apartheid South Africa, public sociology has made a strong foothold (Burrawoy 2004; Webster 2004), but one can find no significant contribution to sociological theory (Hendricks 2006; Sooryamoorthy 2016:3). Sociological theory also has no trace in other African countries, including Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Liberia, Malawi, Nigeria, Tunisia, and Zambia (Akiwowo 1980; Erinosh 1994).

Someone can again fail to detect any robust theoretical contribution to sociology in Asian countries, including East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East (Mukherjee 1977; Alatas 2006; Modi 2009; Hasegawa 2014; Alatas and Sinha 2017). Though Japanese sociology began its journey in 1893 with the help of German and American sociologists, it failed to produce a new theory (Hasegawa 2014). Thus, Sato (2012) claimed that Japanese sociology resembles a “black hole,” which absorbed western sociology without emitting its bright fruits to the world. In the Middle East—a space created by the western mind (Said 1978)—one can also trace no significant theoretical approach to formal sociology (Alatas 2011; Alatas and Sinha 2017).

In India, some important theoretical works in sociology can be found in the areas of social stratification (caste, class, etc.), Hinduism, village community, kinship, joint family, mode of production, Marxist sociology, mobility, urbanization, feminism, social suffering, and postcolonialism (Mukherjee 1977; Deshai 1981; Sen 1982; Oommen 1983; Singh 1986; Srinivas 1994; Mukherji 2006; Modi 2009; Islam 2010; Madan 2011). However, any such systematic and comprehensive sociological theory is unfound. Thus, Modi (2009:8) mentioned that India fails to produce widely acceptable theoretical models in sociology.

The atheoretical tradition in sociology is a norm in Pakistan (Gardezi 1966, 1994; Hafeez 2001; Hafeez 2005; Shah et al. 2005). Although Hamza Alavi and his colleagues produced some good sociological work from the Marxist perspective (Alavi 1972, 1982; Alavi and Harriss 1989; Halliday and Alavi 1988; Alavi and Shanin 2003), Shah et al. (2005) claimed that “Pakistani sociology has been mostly ahistorical, eclectic, atheoretical and thus narrowly empirical.” Sociology in Sri Lanka as an academic discipline started its journey in 1942. However, major sociological contributions to any field are rarely observed (Hettige 2010). Beginning in 1953, Nepalese sociology has been facing major crises, including a lack of theoretical framework and the institutionalization of sociology (Bhandari 2003; Pyakurel 2012).

In Bangladesh, “the emergence of sociology has been a case of borrowing from abroad” (Khan 2008:30). Thus, Islam (2010) claimed that Bangladeshi sociological research has remained confined to testing three western theories: modernization, structural functionalism, and Marxist. Most early sociologists followed these perspectives, which remotely sense a type of ‘hybrid sociology’ (see also Kais 2010). Nazmul Karim (1956, 1980) produced important sociological work on social change and social stratification by drawing on those perspectives. Later, we find many critical sociological works by Bangladeshi sociologists on local and indigenous communities, social stratification, development, social change, mode of production, sociological theory, democracy, globalization, political culture, urban and rural society, nationalism, climate change, forestry, dispossession, land, apparel industry, gender, and health. However, a systematic or widely accepted sociological theory is absent in these works. Islam and Islam (2005:388) thus claimed that “it is no wonder that sociology has remained a marginal and archaic discourse in Bangladesh” (see also Khan 2008). Islam (2010:10) also commented that “sociologists of the country had very little interest in pure theory.”

Why does southern sociology lack any significant theorization? Are the western-type social forces (e.g., Renaissance, French Revolution, Reformation Movement, and Industrial Revolution) necessary to do comprehensive theorization in sociology? Or what else? In answering these questions, this study traces the following reasons (i.e., problems) for the atheoretical tradition in southern societies, particularly in South Asia.

### ***1. Long-lasting Agrarian Tradition***

By the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, western society had reached the climax of modern civilization with advanced technology, capitalism, and numerous systematic knowledge bases including sociology. However, South Asia

had a long-standing tradition of agricultural society from 6,000 BCE, continuing up to the mid-1960s. Due to this agrarian social system—where theoretically only kings were the owners of all the land—Asian society failed to develop the notion of private property and the idea of individualism (the core message of the Renaissance), keeping people in enduring enchantments (Weber 1961). Along the same line, orientalist blamed that Asian people lack reasoning, scientific worldview, democratic values, and the power of self-ruling (Said 1978). Marx (1853a) also claimed that “Asia fell asleep in history.” Since sociology is a science of modern urban capitalist society, it is not easy to see the development of any grand sociological theory under the traditional agrarian social system.

### ***2. Oral Epistemological Tradition***

Many noted scholars in South Asia never wrote anything, though they had a rich oral tradition of knowledge. Thus, we lost some fundamental philosophical discourses that could influence other epistemological areas of human society. Moreover, because of this tradition, very few people in modern South Asia felt encouraged to engage in critical knowledge production. Since theory building in sociology rests on a long tradition of written documents on a society, South Asian sociologists lack proper documentation on earlier societies or intellectual traditions to develop any systematic theory.

### ***3. Lack of Systematic Philosophy***

Many western scholars argue that Eastern or South Asian philosophy is not secular and systematic because it is spiritual and lacks the power of generalization, methodological innovation, and empirical support (Russell 1945; Weber 1961). Due to this non-scientific character of philosophy on which a society's core knowledge systems rest, we find no such secular and systematic epistemological discourse in South Asian philosophy. Since philosophy is the mother of sociological thoughts and we lack such philosophy, we, too, lack systematic sociological theory.

### ***4. Absence of Social Reformative and Technological Revolution***

We find dozens of social and religious movements in South Asia throughout history. However, this territory has yet to see any western-type reformation or scientific revolution. Moreover, we cannot trace intellectual movements like the Enlightenment and Renaissance. We find some social reformation movements to rectify some wrong societal practices. One of them was the *Satidah* practice— a convention that forced a widow to sacrifice her life on her deceased husband's funeral pyre. However, reformation movements could have been more helpful in

developing any philosophical or sociological school of thought. They did not effectively introduce science and reasoning to the mass population, which could have brought fundamental changes to society. Such a lack hindered the development of sociological theory in South Asia, even the institutionalization of sociology.

### ***5. Despotic Formation of the Intellectuals***

In ancient and medieval South Asian societies, Brahmin—the upper social class or priests—had access to produce and disseminate knowledge. They maintained a super control of philosophical and religious schools, keeping all other social classes out of the knowledge system. As such, public intellectual exchanges or critical intellectuals were unseen. And then mass education was unthinkable; even any such attempt was prohibited and punishable. Under this despotic control over knowledge, no philosopher or social thinker can create a systematic, liberated, and sustained tradition of knowledge system. This control also prevented the creation of critical social scientists for many centuries. With this closed practice, we can see no such formation of intellectuals who can dedicate their life building new theories in social science or sociology.

### ***6. External Penetration and Hybridized Worldview***

Since 1500 BCE, dynasties after dynasties from the ancient Middle East came to rule the South Asian territory. They brought particular kinds of worldviews at different times to this society, often eliminating the indigenous worldview and knowledge base. Since 400 BCE, European civilization also brought their worldviews to this territory. After 1756, the British Raj offered the most influencing worldview, threatening the existing worldviews. We see hundreds of dynasties, extremely diverse sections of the population, thousands of spoken languages (more than 3,000), thousands of caste types (over 2,000), and hundreds of other social divisional markers. An extraordinary mixing of different kinds of worldviews thus created and sustained a land of diversity or hybridized worldview. This worldview prevented the creation of a western-type modern nation-state with its dominant and uniform ideology or worldview. Accordingly, no such systematic knowledge base was developed with the support of the state. This worldview also discouraged building a civilizational project (European or American type) outside the territory, which could need new knowledge to rule the external world. A lack of civilizational creed—science, technology, knowledge, and reason—kept this territory out of innovation and a secular knowledge base. As such, systematic study of society has never become a tradition, keeping social thinkers from developing any solid and comprehensive idea.



### ***7. Dependent Industrialization and Urbanization***

Under British colonial rule (1757-1947), small-scale industrialization and urbanization occurred in South Asia. Then, there was no favorable environment to give birth to a capitalist economy by the indigenous bourgeoisie or create a modern education system for the masses. Colonial rulers did not attempt to build educational institutions that could produce a solid knowledge base. So, there was a severe lack of research money for attracting or making scholars to create new knowledge. Moreover, due to insignificant industrialization and urbanization, colonial society could not produce such demand for skilled workers or high thinkers. After the 1950s, South Asia entered a new phase of urbanization and industrialization with the help of American and European dollars and technical support, mainly by the IMF and WB. After the 1980s, urbanization and industrialization took a neoliberal turn, making urbanization and industrialization dependent on foreign money and resources. This dependent urbanization and industrialization never helped produce a serious demand for social scientists to produce solid knowledge (or make theories) to explain their own societies. Neither could they create any research culture in academia or society. This dependent practice never developed a sense of “urbanism”—a way of living a permanent urban life with a meaningful interpretation of urban worldview (Wirth 1938). So dependent urbanization and industrialization evidently prevented producing any significant theoretical work in South Asian sociology.

### ***8. Displaced Epistemology in Society and Academia***

The British rule in the Indian subcontinent produced a new English-educated middle class, who had displaced the traditional knowledge system from society and academia. A relevant quote by Lord Macaulay (1835) can tell us about this:

“I propose that we replace her [Indian] old and ancient education system, her culture, for if the Indians think that all that is foreign and English is good and greater than their own, they will lose their self-esteem, their native self-culture and they will become what we want them, a truly dominated nation.”

The British policy eliminated the possibility of knowledge production by their newly created middle class. These English-educated people separated themselves from traditional philosophy as well as mainstream society. Since the southern states have little money to invest in producing new knowledge, a dedicated middle-class group can do it. So, without a passionate, educated, self-liberated, and secular middle class (in selective cases—university teachers or independent scholars), it is impossible to begin any big intellectual project to produce new knowledge under the

southern capitalist world order. We do not have a great tradition of the systematic philosophical or social school of thought because we lack such middle-class communities, or our colonial or postcolonial societies have derailed that intellectual community.

### ***9. Epistemological Fault Lines in the Knowledge System***

Throughout the history of the Indian Subcontinent, we find a strong presence of discontinuity in knowledge production and dissemination, which I call epistemological fault lines. Thus, we see a couple of important fault lines in this region, such as (1) discontinuity in ancient philosophical discourses due to Aryan invasion, (2) discontinuity in Aryan philosophy due to Greek intrusion and the rise of Hindu and Buddhist philosophical discourses, (3) discontinuity in Hindu and Buddhist philosophical discourses because of the Islamic invasion, and (4) discontinuity in Islamic philosophical discourses because of the British intervention. Due to these epistemological discontinuities, we do not find well-developed philosophical schools or a systematic knowledge structure in this region. And consequently, we are still looking for a robust attempt to produce a sociological theory.

### **Prospects of Building Sociological Theory in The Global South**

Alvin Goulder (1970:404-405) claimed that every social theory rests on some sentiments, observations, experiences, assumptions, mutual encouragements, social realities, and dissatisfaction with old theories. With Goulder's guidelines, can we look into South Asian societies to build a new theory? How possible would it be to do that task? Keeping both questions in mind, I would offer some preliminary guidelines to build sociological theories in the context of South Asia. The outlines are as follows.

#### ***1. Building on Local Philosophical Schools***

A globally-renowned German philosopher Max Müller (1883:6) made a celebrated statement in a lecture titled "*India: What Can it Teach Us*":

“If I were to look over the whole world to find out the country most richly endowed with all the wealth, power, and beauty that nature can bestow – in some parts a very paradise on earth – I should point to India. If I were asked under what sky the human mind has most full developed some of its choicest gifts, has most deeply pondered on the greatest problems of life, and has found solutions of some of them which well deserve the attention even of those who have studied Plato and Kant – I should point to India. And if I were to ask myself from what literature we, here in Europe, we who have been nurtured almost exclusively on the

thoughts of Greeks and Romans, and of one Semitic race, the Jewish, may draw that corrective which is most wanted in order to make our inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in fact more truly human, a life, not for this life only, but a transfigured and eternal life – again I should point to India.”

If Max Müller can be proud of seeing such realities in Indian society, why did South Asian scholars turn their eyes blind to such treasures that could have been tremendous sources of developing systematic philosophical schools similar to the west? At least 12 classical philosophical schools of South Asia might be invaluable resources for South Asian sociologists to build the skeletons of macro sociological perspectives. These schools included: (1) *Nyaya* (rules/logic), (2) *Vaisheshika* (perception and inference), (3) *Samkhya* (enumerationist), (4) *Yoga* (physical, mental, and spiritual), (5) *Mīmāṃsā* (critical investigation of the world), (6) *Vedānta* (knowledge about the nature and cosmos), (7) *Jain* (non-violence, method of gaining extra sensory knowledge), (8) *Nirvana* (Buddhist), (9) *Ajivika* (absolute determinism, rule of nature), (10) *Ajñana* (skepticism), (11) *Charvaka* (skepticism and empiricism) and (12) *Sufism/mysticism*.

Identifying the relevant indigenous philosophical schools might be the first step towards developing sociological theory. In other words, sociologists must build on local philosophical schools (those might have global appeals) to develop any macro/systematic sociological approach. This tradition is found in Marx, who drew on Hegelian philosophy; in Durkheim, who relied on British empiricism; and in Weber, who rested on Kantian philosophy. One more example may attract our attention here. Amartya Sen’s (2009) new theorization of justice—one of the world’s greatest philosophical works—is heavily built on the ideas and examples of Indian moral philosophy.

## ***2. Drawing on the Critical Insights of Postcolonial Studies***

Southern scholars may follow another path for doing sociological theory. They may build on the insights of postcolonial studies—a branch of knowledge that challenges Eurocentric epistemologies and offers new theories to explain the exploitative and oppressive relationships between the global north and global south. Since the 1960s, postcolonial theorists of the global south have produced an extremely rich volume of literature. They are mostly known as Marxist historians, literary critics, psychoanalysts, and feminists. Some pioneering contributors to postcolonial studies are Aimé Césaire (2001[1950]), Frantz Fanon (1961), Albert Memmi (1991 [1965]), and Kwame Nkrumah (1970). This school gained momentum

after the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Along with Said, some other noted scholars included Ranajit Guha (1993), Homi Bhabha (1994), Gayatri Spivak (1999), Dipesh Chakraborty (2000), Partha Chatterjee (1993), and Sara Ahmed (2000).

### ***3. Integrating All Forms of Southern and Northern Marxist Traditions***

In the above, we have seen eleven types of Marxism. It is difficult to produce any new theory by any particular kind of Marxism. So, what hope for theory building then remains for us? Here I see that Marxists of various fronts may collaborate to produce a grand theory for the survival of this planet, not just attack the capitalist system as a whole. Our world is on the verge of collapsing because of wage wars, wars for power and money, continued wealth concentration in a few hands, climate change, and the threats of nuclear weapons. So, to save the planet from a hundred different threats, we need an integrated theoretical practice of Marxism. This attempt can be seen as a re-theorization of the west and east. I may call for this: Marxists of the world unite!

### ***4. Focusing on the Development of Middle-Range Theories***

Merton (1968:68) defined middle-range theory this way: "Middle-range theories consist of limited sets of assumptions from which specific hypotheses are logically derived and confirmed by empirical investigation." Similar to many other scholars (such as Hans Zetterberg, Andrzej Malewski, Peter Blau, Alvin Gouldner, S. Selznick), I believe that this is a practical path that southern sociologists may follow to produce new theories grounded in empirical realities. We may find some examples of such theorization in South Asian sociology, but I need more time to find and include such works in the next project. I can only mention my three recently published research works following such a theorizing path (Mondal 2021, 2023, 2024).

### ***5. Framing Ideas for A New Society Dominated by the AI***

Gouldner (1970) argued that every social theory has some infrastructural bases, including man, society, and culture. I elaborate on this idea to show how sociologists need a new theorization to explore a new relationship between humans, society, and AI capitalism. A sociological theory of such kind may need to integrate various social systems into one unified framing. This frame may examine AI-dominated capitalist society from a post-functionalist perspective: humans/AI and their personality systems + society and its social system + culture and its societal representations + political system and its location in human action + economic system and its presence in human reproduction.

### ***6. Exploring New Ideas About the Relationship Between Human Society and The Universe***

Our capitalist world order has already operated missions to commodify and privatize outer space of this planet as well as some planets of this solar system. SpaceX has been trying to make outer space a commercial tourist spot. China sent its own space station to monitor this planet and explore further possibilities of commodifying space. America created a specialized branch called the space military to control space. Above all, NASA has been generating new knowledge for decades for further market expansion to space. What can these examples tell us? A new group of sociologists would need to study these commercial interventions in space, which would soon reorganize our social world by creating a new relationship between space and society. A new space for sociological theorization is yet to be constructed.

### **Conclusion**

This study has examined the historical and contemporary status of global sociological theory. In doing so, it has investigated the origin, development, and decline of sociological theory in the global north. Moreover, it has identified the problems and prospects for developing sociological theory in southern societies. It has explored the reasons for the lack of systematic sociological theory in southern societies and offered guidelines for southern scholars to produce new sociological theories. Its arguments have been built on the global literature on sociological theory. It has used historical and comparative methodological approaches to identify the problems and prospects for doing sociological theory in the global south, particularly in South Asia.

When the capitalist world order observed a major restructuring in its system during the 1970s, Bottomore and Nisbet (1979) noticed a decisive “comatose” in sociological theory. Denzin (1995) declared the death of sociological theory and sent an SOS to save it (see also Siedman 1994; Stinchcombe 1994; Abbott 2000; Turner 2006; Islam 2010). However, other sociologists, including Wallerstein (1997, 2001) and Burawoy (2007, 2016) showed hope for new theorization in sociology. So, while the northern sociological theory is in crisis and southern sociological theory is absent, this research hopes that sociologists from both societies will work ardently to theorize human societies in the twenty-first century and beyond. This new theorization is much expected for understanding the macro structure of the global society—which is now dreadfully unequal, environmentally crumbling, intellectually techno-dependent (e.g., AI), economically dysfunctional, politically authoritarian, legally abusive, morally decaying, and culturally dispossessed. This theorization is possible if a group of people wholeheartedly invest their time and

talent as well as mobilize the financial and moral support of the state and social institutions.

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