

Can there be a sociological concept of interest?

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Abstract. This article raises the question of whether it is possible to have not only an economic concept of interest but also a sociological one, and, if so, what such a concept would be like. By way of an answer, the history of how sociologists have tried to use the concept of interest in their analyses is traced, starting with Gustav Ratzenhofer in the 1890s and ending with Pierre Bourdieu and John Meyer today. This focus on what sociologists have to say about interest represents a novelty as the conventional histories of this concept pass over the contribution by sociologists in total silence. The various attempts by sociologists to use the concept of interest are divided into two main categories: when interest is seen as *the* driving force in social life, and when interest is seen as *a* major force in social life, together with other factors. I also discuss the argument by some sociologists that interest is of little or no importance in social life. The different strategies for how to handle the concept of interest in a sociological analysis are discussed in the concluding remarks, where it is argued (following Weber and Bourdieu) that interests can usefully be understood to play an important role in social life, but together with other factors.

The concept of interest today is typically associated with the science of economics, not sociology, and as a result of this, contemporary sociologists have paid less attention to this concept than it deserves.¹ In this article I trace the history of interest as *a sociological concept*, something that is missing from the histories of the concept of interest.² While authors such as Albert O. Hirschman and Stephen Holmes cover what a number of philosophers, literary authors, political scientists, and economists have said on the topic, they pass over the contribution by sociologists in total silence. I also try to determine when, and under what conditions, a sociological concept of interest is possible as well as useful.

As things stand today, the concept of interest is currently not an accepted sociological concept. It is true that the term “interest” often appears in sociological writings, and it is also true that if one consults a sociological dictionary there may well be an entry for this very term. But even

when the concept of interest does appear in a sociological text or in a sociological dictionary, its meaning is more or less taken for granted and there are no references to its earlier use, to alternative meanings and the like. It is essentially a concept without history and it presents no problems. It constitutes, in brief, what Robert K. Merton has termed a "*proto-concept*" or a term that is used without much awareness or conceptual precision – and which for this very reason does not fulfill its function as a social science concept very well. "A proto-concept is an early, rudimentary, particularized, and largely unexplicated idea," Merton says, "[while] a concept is a general idea that once having been defined, tagged, substantially generalized, and explicated can effectively guide inquiry into seemingly diverse phenomena."³ In short, when it comes to the sociological concept of interest, everyone has to invent the wheel on her own.

One of the purposes of this article is to give back to the concept of interest its own history, especially when it comes to its sociological use.⁴ As things turn out, a large number of sociologists have in fact drawn on the concept of interest in their work, and the history of these uses is complex and fascinating in its own right. Since it is also a history that is little known today, it deserves to be told, so that it can be incorporated into the more general history of the concept of interest.

To write this history in the detail that it deserves, however, is a task that goes beyond the aim of this article, and it would also take us in a different direction from the one that I want to take, namely to figure out how the concept of interest can be used in a creative way in sociology. Instead of presenting the uses of the concept of interest among sociologists in chronological order – starting with the classics and ending today – I have therefore chosen to center this article around the question of whether sociologists, in their attempts to struggle with the concept of interest, have succeeded in coming up with a useful and worthwhile concept.

Nonetheless, a few words do need to be said about the history of the use of the concept of interest in sociology from a more conventional perspective. While there are still many holes to be filled in, the broad outlines of such an account would appear to be as follows. The one and only time during the history of sociology that a serious effort was made to turn the concept of interest into a sociological concept, and when there also was a lively discussion of its pros and cons, was during what we may call its pioneer phase, roughly 1890–1910. The central

figure in this effort was Gustav Ratzenhofer (1842–1904), an Austrian sociologist who is largely forgotten today. His ideas were especially well received in the United States, where two of the central figures in early American sociology – Albion Small and E.A. Ross – not only felt that the concept of interest deserved to be incorporated into the sociological analysis, but also assigned it a central place.

The concept of interest was also used by the classics in sociology, and several of them found it very useful. This is especially true for Max Weber and Georg Simmel, who both regarded interest as an important driving force in modern society. Weber also attempted to develop several distinct concepts by introducing the idea of interest into them, as exemplified by class, certain types of collective action, and so on. Emile Durkheim was much less enthusiastic about the use of the concept of interest than Weber and Simmel, but he nonetheless cast some of his most important concerns in the language of general interest versus self-interest. In brief, interest was very much a part of the set of concepts that the classics used when they laid the foundation for modern sociology.

What happened after the classics is, on the other hand, much less clear, apart from the fact that the ideas of Ratzenhofer and the classics fell into oblivion. No references to its earlier use were made, and this is still the case. The general verdict appears to have been that interest was part of the general social science vocabulary but did not constitute a sociological concept of its own or otherwise merit much discussion. The classical textbook in sociology by Park and Burgess (1921) basically ignores the concept of interest, while interest is sharply criticized in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937) by Talcott Parsons.

After World War II the concept of interest has occasionally resurfaced, not least in the stratification literature and in exchange theory. Only two of the major sociologists from the post-World War II period, however, have assigned it a central role in their systems, as far as I know. These are two persons who otherwise belong to very different camps, namely James Coleman and Pierre Bourdieu.

The ideas on interest by Ratzenhofer, Small, Weber, Coleman and so on all deserve a discussion of their own, especially as their ideas have not been given the attention they deserve. To some extent I also discuss each of them in this article. Because the aim of this article, however, is

to try to establish a useful sociological concept of interest rather than to write its history, I proceed as follows. I have grouped the ideas of Ratzenhofer and the other sociologists into a few categories, as a way of starting a meaningful discussion of them. In the first of these the concept of interest is seen as being of crucial importance and as *the* major cause or driving force of social behavior. In the second category, interest is of much importance, but it has also been argued that several other forces cause social behavior. The third category is about sociologists who argue that interest is of little or no importance.

Approach # 1: Interest as *the* driving force in social life

Each of the three categories just mentioned may be understood as ideal types in the sense that they will be presented with a conceptual clarity that they lack in reality. It is also the case that some authors belong to several categories, even if the main gist of their thinking usually qualifies them for one rather than another. The first category discussed is the one according to which interest is seen as *the* major cause in social life and consequently of crucial importance to sociological theory. What I primarily show is how well the authors who belong to this category are able to argue for their position and if their arguments hold up. It is clear that the position taken by, say, Ratzenhofer and Simmel around 1900, will differ from that of James Coleman, who was active more than half a century later.

In 1905, Albion Small, who was at this time the chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago, noted that “no single term is of more constant use in recent sociology than this term ‘interests.’”⁵ This statement was made in Small’s most important work, *General Sociology*. The very same year another pioneer in U.S. sociology, E.A. Ross, published a similarly fundamental work, *Foundations of Sociology*, in which interest was also the central category.⁶ And a few years later Arthur Bentley, who worked for a while as a sociologist, published his classic study, *Process of Government*, in which the idea of interest group has its origins.⁷

In their discussions of interest, all of these thinkers referred to what they saw as the deeply inspiring work of Gustav Ratzenhofer, especially *Die Sociologische Erkenntnis* (1898). Ratzenhofer (1842–1904) was an officer in the Austrian army and the author of several works that proclaimed interest to be the basic force in nature as well as in society.

According to Beat Huber in *Der Begriff des Interesses in den Sozialwissenschaften*, the first effort to develop a precise understanding of the concept of interest in the social sciences was undertaken towards the end of the nineteenth century. She also notes that “Ratzenhofer was the first author who made an attempt to systematically view social life from the perspective of interest.”⁸

According to Ratzenhofer, there exists a basic force in the cosmos (*Urkraft*) that accounts for life and also can be found among humans in the form of “inborn interest.”⁹ What drives human behavior, in other words, is interest. Sociology is defined by Ratzenhofer as the science of interaction or reciprocal influence (*Wechselbeziehungen*). Ratzenhofer, however, was also very careful to point out that sociology does not deal with an autonomous dimension of human life. The social behavior of human beings depends not only on social interaction but also on other factors such as biology, psychology and so on. Similar to Comte, Ratzenhofer thought that sociology was a science whose main task was to synthesize the insights of the other sciences.

Besides presenting interest as a basic force, Ratzenhofer also supplied a typology of interests in his work. There exist five types of interest: “procreative interest,” “physiological interest,” “individual interest,” “social interest,” and “transcendental interest.”¹⁰ Social interests are defined as interests that are related to consanguinity and group welfare. Each of the five types of interest produce “impulses” towards action in human beings; and social life is what results when human beings act on these impulses. Social life, in other words, can only be understood if interests are taken into account; it has no inherent or independent dynamic. Ideas, for example, only become important in social life if they answer to people’s needs or interests. “It is the key of interests that unlocks the door of every treasure house of sociological lore,” as Ratzenhofer once put it.¹¹

A common critique of Ratzenhofer is that his theory of interest is not so much sociological as psychological and biological. It is indeed true that his key work on interest, *Die Sociologische Erkenntnis*, can better be characterized as a philosophy of science type of work than as a study that elaborates on and specifies the role of interests in social life. Nonetheless, Ratzenhofer did set interest on the agenda of sociology. And in doing so, he also pioneered what was to become a very popular strategy for how to introduce interest into sociological analysis, namely as a force that drives social relationships.

Ratzenhofer's American followers (Albion Small, E.A. Ross, and Arthur Bentley)

Ratzenhofer had a number of important followers, especially in the United States, and Albion Small (1854–1926) was the foremost of these. Small took over many of Ratzenhofer's ideas about interest and also spread these very effectively, not least through *The American Journal of Sociology* in which he often published. Just as Ratzenhofer, he saw interest as part of nature; he also felt that it was necessary to develop a typology of interests; and he argued that interests constitute the master key to sociological analysis. "Sociology," as Small put it in *General Sociology*, "might be said to be the science of human interests and their workings under all conditions."¹²

Like Ratzenhofer, Small saw interest as part of the cosmos: "in the beginning were interests."¹³ Just as the physicist makes the assumption that something called atoms constitute the basic units of matter, so the sociologist should make the assumption that interests constitute the basic units of human behavior. "The notion of interest is accordingly serving the same purpose in sociology that the notion of atoms has served in physical science."¹⁴ No one has ever seen an atom, and it is the same with interests; they should be used because they constitute a useful abstraction.

According to Small, interests explain the force and strength with which people pursue certain goals in society. He describes, for example, in one place interest as a "propulsion" and as "an energetic pushing forward," and in another place as "storage batteries of . . . physical energy."¹⁵ Small is also careful to draw a sharp conceptual line between interests as an object of study in biology and psychology, on the one hand, and in sociology, on the other. Although the former two sciences deal with interests as these are being constituted, sociology takes them for granted and begins with "the finished product."¹⁶

According to Small, the centrality of interest to human action is absolute:

Every act that every man performs is to be traced back to an interest. We eat because there is a desire for food; but the desire is set in motion by a bodily interest. We sleep because we are tired; but the weariness is a function of the bodily interest in re-building used-up tissue. We play because there is a bodily interest in the use of the muscles. We study because there is a mental interest in satisfying curiosity. . . . We go to the market to supply an economic

interest, and to war because of some social interest of whatever mixed or simple form.¹⁷

Small, however, does not rest content with an undifferentiated concept of interest; he argues rather that it is absolutely essential for modern sociology to develop a classification of interests. He suggests that there are six basic or elementary types of interest: health interest, wealth interest, sociability interest, knowledge interest, beauty interest and rightness interest. Each of these six interests can be subdivided further; and the health interest consists, for example, of the food interest, the sex interest and the work interest. All concrete actions by human beings, Small continues, are the products of these subdivided interests or of combinations of several interests: "I have not been able to find any human act that requires, for explanation, any motive that cannot be accounted for by specialization and combination of these interests."¹⁸

In society interests enter either into conflict with one another or support one another. Small states that social processes typically contain a mixture of interests that conflict with one another or support one another. He also notes that it is common with conflicts in modern society; and it is clear that Small, like Ratzenhofer, is a proponent of what is known in contemporary sociology as conflict theory. Small also emphasizes that existing social structures in society can either aid or block interest-driven actions. "Institutions," we read, can operate as "channels" for the actors, and their interests, as well as "obstructions."¹⁹

Although *General Sociology* contains many pages where the role of interests in social life is discussed on a very abstract level, much less room is devoted to concrete examples. From one of the few examples that Small does provide, however, it is possible to get a sense of the value of his approach as an empirical tool. The example in question is how legislation against the use of alcohol had recently come about in some American states as well as the resistance that this type of legislation had encountered in these same states.²⁰ While laws of this type, and opposition to them, may be seen as social facts in their own right, Small says, they are much better conceptualized in terms of interests: interests that support the law as well as interests that oppose it. It is only by outlining all of these interests and by laying bare their exact combination that the sociologist will be in a position to understand fully what is going on.

Small suggests that six interests support the laws against the use of alcohol, while seven oppose it. Among the former are, for example, a

“moral interest” as well as “a political interest in making capital out of a policy that would win certain voters.” Among the interests that oppose the laws are “immoral interests” seeking gain at the expense of others; “the interest in satisfying the drink appetite”; and “the interest in personal freedom.” Small emphasizes that the interests that support the laws as well as those that are against them vary in strength according to the concrete circumstances.

Small, in brief, continued the agenda of Ratzenhofer but also tried to improve upon it. Like Ratzenhofer, he attempted to account for the role of interest in different parts of society through the introduction of a typology. He, however, rejected the notion that interests are psychological or biological in nature through the argument that these two sciences deal with interests as they are being formed, while sociology only deals with interests once these have come into being. As opposed to Ratzenhofer, Small also explicitly asked the question of how interests are related to the social structure. His answer was that these social structures can affect interests in two ways: either they operate as obstacles to the interests or as channels for them. Small, however, did not work these ideas out; they are just mentioned in a few lines in a book that is about five hundred pages long. The end result, as in the case of Ratzenhofer, is a number of general statements about the importance of interests in society – but few concrete ideas about how one may introduce the idea of interests into sociological analysis in a meaningful manner.

Ratzenhofer had two important followers in the United States besides Small. One of these was E.A. Ross (1866–1951) and the other Arthur Bentley (1870–1957). Ross’ major work, in which he advocated that sociology should be based on interests, appeared in the very same year as Small’s *General Sociology* and was entitled *Foundations of Sociology* (1905). In it Ross outlined an approach to interests that is very similar to those of Ratzenhofer and Small. Interest is proclaimed to be the foundation of everything social; and a classification of interests is presented. According to Ross, there are four major types of interests and these “constitute the chief history-making forces” (economic, political, religious and intellectual interests).²¹

Even more fundamental than the interests, however, are what Ross calls “desires,” and there are nine types of these (“appetitive,” “hedonic,” “egotic” and so on).²² Although desires constitute “the primary forces,” interests are “great complexes, woven of multicolored strands of desire, which shape society and make history.”²³ Ross, in other words, suggests

that impulses (“desires”) drive interests, and not the other way around, as does Ratzenhofer.

Anyone who has studied the systems of Ratzenhofer and Small will find little that is new in Ross. On two points, however, Ross deserves some credit. First, he tried to associate the term “social forces” with the concept of interests; and this was a happy choice on his part because this expression nicely mixes a key feature of interest (its strength or force) with a terminology that has a genuine sociological touch to it.²⁴ Second, Ross was among the first to try to theorize the concept of interest groups. *Social Foundations* contains, for example, a long section on this topic, even if the notion of interest group has mainly come to be associated with the work of Arthur Bentley.

The name of Arthur Bentley is today probably as forgotten among sociologists as those of Ratzenhofer, Small, and Ross. This is a pity because Bentley’s study of interests, *The Process of Government* (1908), contains a number of sharp and useful ideas on interest and how it can be used in a sociological analysis. Take, for example, Bentley’s skillful critique of Small and other thinkers who conceptualize interests as drives or impulses.²⁵ According to Bentley, this way of proceeding is inadmissible for two reasons. First, the assumption is made by Small that the individual has a number of interests *before* she enters society; and these interests are then used to explain what happens *in* society. Second, what Small actually does in his work, Bentley says, is to take various interests as they exist in society, project them onto the individual, and then use them to explain what happens in society. This type of reasoning “reduces itself to the identical proposition $A=A$.”²⁶

Instead of proceeding in this manner, Bentley argues, one should start with the observation of what actually goes on in society and the many groups that are active in it. If we do this, we soon realize that interests are the same as groups:

There is no group without its interest. An interest, as the term will be used in this work, is the equivalent of a group. We may speak also of an interest group or of a group interest, again merely for the sake of clearness in expression. The group and the interest are not separate. There exists only one thing, that is, so many men bound together in or along the path of a certain activity.²⁷

Bentley insists that interest is the same as group. He also equates interest with valuation; and his argument is that each group, as it acts, also expresses its valuation or interest. In order to understand what a

group's interest consists of, strict empirical observation is necessary. It is inadmissible, for example, to proceed as economists do and assign some kind of objective value/interest to a group. "If we should substitute for the actual interest of the activity some 'objective utility,' to use the economist's term, we should be going far astray, for no such 'objective utility' appears . . . at all."²⁸

According to Bentley, groups are always defined in terms of other groups, and their interests are consequently also defined in terms of other interests. By this statement Bentley means as follows. A group of slaves is, for example, defined in relation to the group of slave owners as well as in relation to other groups in society. Similarly, the interests of workers are defined by the group of employers and other groups in capitalist society. To Bentley, in other words, the group is the basic unit of society, and therefore all you need in order to explain what happens. As part of this argument, Bentley also rejects the notion that such factors as "rules of the game" or tradition are useful as explanations.²⁹ Both of these in reality, Bentley argues, are nothing but the result of the activities or interests of groups. If we, for example, want to explain how groups evolve over time and through history, we are confronting a situation that is similar to explaining why an arrow follows a certain course. At each point of its course, Bentley argues, the flight of the arrow is the result of the forces that act on it; it is not the result of some rules or tradition. In brief, interest is, as always, the key.

Interest and social forms (Georg Simmel)

Georg Simmel (1858–1918) is usually presented as a theoretician of modernity, sociability, and intersecting social circles, so it may seem somewhat surprising to mention his name in a discussion of such a "realistic" concept as interest. Nonetheless, Simmel does discuss interest in his sociological work, including the key theoretical essay in *Soziologie*, which is called "The Problem of Sociology." In this and several other essays, Simmel suggests a way of integrating interest into sociological theory that was quite popular at the time, namely as a force that led to the formation of social structure.

Although Simmel once reviewed a book by Ratzenhofer on politics, it is currently not known whether he also was familiar with what Ratzenhofer had written on interest.³⁰ Still, it is clear that Simmel worked within the general approach to interest that is associated with the work of Ratzenhofer in the following sense. First, Simmel ascribed

great importance to interests: they were truly *the* cause of human behavior, including social behavior. And second, Simmel saw interest as essentially an impulse or a drive that was pre-social.

From this point onwards, however, Simmel introduced a few small but crucial changes in his argument that make his approach quite different from that of Ratzenhofer. It should also be added that Simmel never engaged in the exercise of enumerating what interests exist, what they should be called, and how they should be ranked. As Simmel saw it, interests drive behavior; and this behavior will take different forms (and different names), once they become social. Interests, in other words, supply the force that drives the behavior, which may take various social forms, such as subordination-superordination, competition, and so on. To cite the key formulation in “The Problem of Sociology”:

Sociation is the form (realized in innumerable different ways) in which individuals grow together into a unity and within which their interests are realized. And it is on the basis of their interests – sensuous or ideal, momentary or lasting, conscious or unconscious, causal or teleological – that individuals form such unities.³¹

A similar but considerably more engaging formulation of the same idea can be found in another Simmel classic, “The Sociology of Sociability”:

On the one hand are the individuals in their directly perceptible existence, the bearers of the processes of association, who are united by these processes into the higher unity that one calls ‘society’; on the other hand, the interests which, living in the individuals, motivate such union: economic and ideal interests, warlike and erotic, religious and charitable. To satisfy such urges and to attain such purposes, arise the innumerable forms of social life, all the one-with-another, for-one-another, in-one-another, against-one-another, and through-one-another, in state and commune, in church and economic associations, in family and clubs. The energy effects of atoms upon each other bring matter into the innumerable forms which we see as ‘things’. Just so the impulses and interests, which a man experiences in himself and which push him out toward other men, bring about all the forms of association by which a mere sum of separate individuals are made into ‘society’.³²

What Simmel says in this quote summarizes his position on the role of interest in society, except for one minor point. This is that just as one interest can take the expression of many different social forms, so different interests can take the expression of one and the same social form. Economic interests and sexual interests, for example, may both take the form of competition; and political interests and economic interests may be expressed in terms of, say, domination, conflict or subordination-superordination.

Simmel's position is consequently the following: it is interests that drive or propel human behavior, and some of this behavior is social in the sense that it deals with interaction. Social behavior is understood by Simmel as taking different "social forms"; and as examples of these forms Simmel mentions subordination-superordination, conflict, competition and so on. What distinguishes Simmel from Ratzenhofer, Small and Ross is, in other words, not very much, but still of some importance, namely that interests, once they have become part of the social world, take on an entirely new and social form. When they do this, they lose the name of "interest" and are from now on exclusively referred to as sociological terms. Interest, in other words, disappears but still operates as the invisible cause of what happens in society.

Interest as the foundation for sociological theory in general
(James Coleman)

Although the distance in years between Simmel and James Coleman (1926–1995) is large – more than half a century – there are nonetheless some distinct parallels between the way they approach interest and its role in sociological explanation. Both, for example, attach a very important role to it; interest is essentially what drives social action. Both also preferred to translate interest into other terms rather than use it as a sociological concept in its own right.

Coleman was not influenced by Simmel's ideas on interest or at least he does not refer to these. He was, on the other hand, familiar with the broad outlines of the history of the concept of interest, primarily through the writings of Albert O. Hirschman.³³ Beyond this, we also know that Coleman had studied the ideas of Arthur Bentley; he was also deeply knowledgeable in economics.

Coleman began to experiment with the idea that interest should be central to sociological analysis some time in the 1960s.³⁴ This means that one can find writings on this topic from several decades since Coleman died in 1995. The place where he made his most sustained attempt to develop a way to integrate the concept of interest into theoretical ideas in this work are to be found in chapter 2 ("Actors and Resources, Control and Interest"), which means that they come *after* the famous analysis of the micro-macro problem in Ch. 1. Whether the fact that Coleman chose not to present his discussion of interest in the first chapter is the reason why his ideas on this topic have not been much discussed by sociologists is difficult to know. They

are in any case important, not least because Coleman did propose a novel and original way of introducing the concept of interest into sociology.

In chapter 2 of *Foundations of Social Theory* Coleman cites the statement by H elvetius that interest should hold the same position in the analysis of the moral (or social) universe as the laws of movement in the analysis of the physical world, and adds that this position is “close” to his own.³⁶ That interest constitutes the very foundation of Coleman’s theory of social action becomes abundantly clear when he also states that the sociologist should start with the idea of interest, more precisely with the notion that the actor always attempts to maximize her self-interest, and go from there. Coleman’s reference to maximization of self-interest shows the influence of economics on his thought. Coleman, however, does not want to turn sociology into economics but rather improve sociology by introducing some ideas from economics into it. Just as Coleman advocated the introduction of social structure into economic analysis (to cite the title of one of his articles), one can say that he wanted to introduce interests into sociological analysis.³⁷

The way that Coleman goes about this project in chapter 2 in *Foundations* is as follows. An actor is assumed to have an interest in an object or event, but in order to satisfy this interest she also has to have “control” over “the resources” that are of interest to her. If the actor does have control over the resources she is interested in, there will be no social action. If, however, we turn to the situation in which two actors have an interest in the resources that the other actor controls, then the two actors will interact with one another, and we have what Coleman terms a social system. Coleman illustrates his argument with a simple figure (see Figure 1).

While Coleman makes the same move as Simmel in his argument that interest drives action, and that this action has to be social if the interest is to be satisfied, there also exist important differences between their arguments. For one thing, Coleman introduces two new concepts to handle the notion of interest better: “control” and “resources.” Coleman also rejects the idea that interest is something pre-social/psychological and in so doing, follows the lead of the economists. As to the existence of norms, Coleman states that these undoubtedly play a central role in society but that it is imperative to break with the sociologists’ tendency to take these for granted and not present an argument why they exist in the first place. One way to do so, according to Coleman, would be

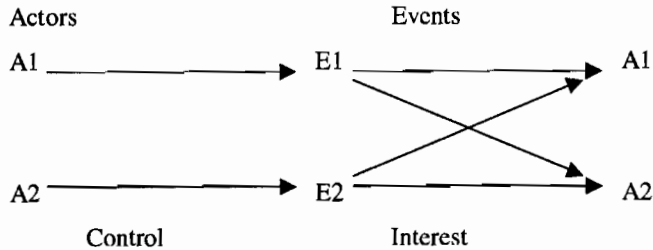


Figure 1. Coleman's model of how interests drive social action.

Comment: Coleman presents this figure of how interests drive social interaction in chapter 2 in *Foundations of Social Theory*. The main novelty in this scheme is the idea that for an actor to satisfy her interest, she needs control over the resources that are of interest to her.

to start with interests and to proceed from there. Norms, in short, can and should be related to actions driven by interests.

Coleman's way of formulating his ideas in chapter 2 of *Foundations* shows that he wanted to develop a sociology based on interest, and that the way to do this was to add the ideas of control and resources. This, however, is not how he proceeds in *Foundations*, and while the rest of this work indeed testifies to the author's attempt to assign a central role to interest in sociology, this is instead done in an ad hoc manner that has little to do with control and resources. Social capital, for example, is defined as social relations of the kind that are needed to realize an interest.³⁸ Coleman's analysis of the labor market and the firm draw primarily on agency theory, which according to Coleman is essentially sociological because it is based on the interactions among the agent, the principal, and a third party.³⁹ Weber's analysis of bureaucracy is criticized on the ground that workers are not simply following orders and behaving bureaucrats; they also have their own distinct interests. Norms, finally, come into being, according to Coleman, as part of a conscious effort by an actor to realize her interest.⁴⁰

While it again deserves to be pointed out that Coleman presents his own theory for how to introduce interest into sociology in chapter 2 of *Foundations*, but fails to apply it in much of the book, he should nonetheless be credited with having made an important attempt to take the concept of interest and give it a sociological twist in the analysis of a series of important topics. Beyond the ones that have just been alluded to, a special mention should also be made of his discussion of corporate actors and their interests. While earlier sociologists usually only assigned interest to single individuals or aggregates of individuals,

Coleman was fascinated by the idea of a fictitious actor that came into being in the Middle Ages, and in the nineteenth century led to the notion of the corporation as a legal personality. According to Coleman, the idea of the modern corporation constituted an exceptionally important social invention.

Approach # 2: Interest as one major force in social life

All the sociologists who have just been discussed, from Ratzenhofer to Coleman, have in common that they regard interest as *the* major force or *Urkraft* in social life; interest accounts for most of what is going on. This idea is worked out in different ways; and while Bentley, for example, views social life as totally dominated by group interests, Simmel sees it as exclusively consisting of social forms, all of which are driven by interests. Some of the thinkers work with interests in their pre-social forms, be they biological or psychological (Ratzenhofer, Small, Ross), while others see them as social or as an assumption along the lines of economists (Bentley, Coleman).

The sociologists who will be discussed in this section differ from Ratzenhofer in that they view interest as an important force in social life, but also that they try to delimit and specify the role of interest. In doing so, they follow different strategies. Max Weber attempts to pinpoint the areas of social life where interest, and primarily economic interest, plays a key role. Pierre Bourdieu, in contrast, makes interest into part of his general theory of sociology. Both Weber's and Bourdieu's attempts to deal with the concept of interest can be described as sustained, even though none of them paid any attention whatsoever to the history of interest or earlier attempts to use it for sociological purposes.

Weber uses the term interest very often; in many different places in his work; and also with many different meanings. A frequency count shows that *Interesse* and related terms come after *Sinn* and related concepts (3,426) with 2,786 hits, but before, say, *Handeln* (1,511), *Kultur* (1,207) and words related to *Soziologie* (602).⁴¹ In this article I primarily focus on Weber's use of interest in *Economy and Society* as this is the place where one can find his most concentrated attempt to introduce interest into his sociological categories. After having presented Weber's ideas on how interest can be used in sociology – essentially by being integrated (Weber suggests) in various middle-range sociological concepts – I also comment on his famous statement (in another

work) that material and ideal interest drive human behavior, and that ideas sometimes can operate as switchmen for interest-driven action.

Economy and Society # 1: Regular behavior that is interest-driven

The term *Interesse* does not appear in the first paragraph in Ch. 1 in *Economy and Society*, in which Weber presents his famous definition of interpretive sociology, nor in the equally important twenty pages long explication that is appended to it. The term interest does, however, play a prominent role in one of the first paragraphs in Ch. 1, namely in Paragraph 4, entitled “Types of Action Orientation: Usage, Custom, Self-Interest.”

According to this paragraph, there are certain empirical uniformities or regularities in social life that are of much interest to the sociologist, as they involve distinct types of behavior. Three such types are *usage* (or regular social action), *custom* (or social action that is of long standing), and social action that is “*determined by self-interest*” (“*bedingt durch Interessenlage* [‘*Interessenbedingt*’]”). The latter type of regularity is described as follows: “a uniformity of orientations. . . if and insofar as the actors’ conduct is instrumentally (*zweckrational*) oriented toward identical expectations.”⁴²

What is important about this statement, first of all, is Weber’s description of interest-driven action as essentially “instrumental” (*zweckrational*). By using this term Weber connects interest-driven action to the typology of social action that is presented in Paragraph 2 (“Types of Social Action”). Interest-driven action should therefore be understood as a collective version of instrumental action. In its capacity as instrumental action it also consists essentially of two parts: (1) “the actor’s own rationally pursued and calculated ends”; and (2) that other actors (as well as objects) are taken into account.⁴³ To this should be added that instrumental rational action in principle is action that is carried out with a high degree of consciousness, and that it stands in contrast to “traditional social action” and “affectual social action” in this respect. The reader may recall that value-rational action, in contrast, is characterized by the fact that the actor is exclusively driven by values that are consciously taken into account, and that it is pursued without regard for success.

In his explication of the paragraph on social action, Weber uses the market to illustrate regular behavior that is interest-driven as well as

collective. If a market actor is (instrumentally) rational, she will orient her behavior in an impersonal way to other market actors, in order to realize her economic interest. The more that this is done – that is, the more the behavior is oriented to what Weber in Paragraph 4 calls “identical expectations” – the more the behavior in the market will be rational and interest-driven. Weber also points out that actors who deviate from this behavior will hurt themselves; they will also cause difficulties for the other actors and thereby evoke their anger.

Weber also points to some interesting qualities of so-called interest-driven behavior. For one thing, this type of behavior, according to Weber, is often much sturdier than behavior that is just oriented to norms. Or, as he puts it, uniformities of this type “are far more stable than they would be if actions were oriented to a system of norms and duties that were considered binding on the members of the group.”⁴⁴

Second, Weber notes that economists have been very interested in the fact that there are interest-driven regularities of great stability. Indeed, this has been one of the circumstances, Weber says, that has made “economics [possible] as a science.”⁴⁵ Marginal utility economics from the early twentieth century was, of course, based on the notion of interest-driven behavior – but has nothing to say about norm-driven or customary behavior.

Third, Weber adds that interest-driven regular behavior, which figures so prominently in the economic sphere, can also be found “in all other spheres of action as well.”⁴⁶ This is important as it means that interest-driven behavior can be found not only in the sphere of the economy, but also in those of politics, religion, intellectual life and erotic life. Weber writes:

This type, with its distinct awareness and lack of feeling bound, is the polar antithesis of every sort of unthinking acquiescence in customary ways as well as of devotion to norms consciously accepted as absolute values. (My translation.)⁴⁷

What characterizes interest-driven behavior, then, are primarily two things: “*distinct awareness*” and “*lack of feeling bound*.”

Fourth, Weber suggests that interest-driven behavior of the regular kind becomes more common as the world becomes more rational. Customs recede, he continues, and are replaced by market-oriented and similar types of behavior. Or in Weber’s words: “One of the most important aspects of the process of ‘rationalization’ of action is the substitution for

the unthinking acceptance of ancient custom, of deliberate adaptation to situations in terms of self-interest.⁴⁸

Last, immediately following paragraph 4 Weber makes the point that for an order to be stable, it cannot exclusively rest on interest (or violence); it also has to be perceived as valid or binding.⁴⁹ This legitimacy, as Weber terms it, comes about through norms and is sometimes also enforced through law. Given the prevalence of legitimate orders in most societies, it seems clear that for Weber interests are typically closely associated with norms.

Economy and Society # 2: The role of interests in associative relationships or associations

As chapter 1 in *Economy and Society* progresses, the social phenomena that are discussed become increasingly complex; and Weber advances from social action, to social relationship, to organizations, and so on. This is also true for social phenomena that have something to do with interests, as exemplified by the advance from paragraph 4 on “Types of Action Orientation” to paragraph 9 on “Communal and Associative Relationships.”⁵⁰ While a communal relationship, according to *Economy and Society*, is characterized by a sense among the actors that they all belong together, an associative relationship is characterized by the fact that it rests on interests that are rationally adjusted to one another or balanced against each other (*Vergemeinschaftung* versus *Vergesellschaftung*).

Associative relationships or associations, Weber states, can be found in their most pure version in the following three forms: (1) market exchange (where compromises between opposed interests are common); (2) instrumental associations based on the material interests of the members (*Zweckverein*); and (3) associations devoted to a cause and of a value-rational nature (*Gesinnungsverein*). A modern corporation would be an example of an instrumental and interest-based association, and so would what Weber elsewhere in *Economy and Society* terms interest groups (*Interessenverbände*).⁵¹ A religious sect, on the other hand, would be an example of a value-rational association.

Weber emphasizes that associative relationships or associations are conflictual in nature, in that they are based on interests that oppose each other. This means that there will either be compromises (as in the market) or a continuous opposition of interests (as in an instrumental

association). Weber also points out that most relationships or associations are communal in nature to some extent, including those that at first may seem to be exclusively motivated by rationally pursued economic interests. “Any social relationship” that “lasts for long periods,” Weber emphasizes, will have elements of communal feelings to them, including relationships in work places and offices.⁵² The conflicts, however, will be played out within the relationship or association.

Weber mentions rational market transactions as an example of associative relationships or associations, and this reminds us of his earlier discussion in Paragraph 4 of interest-driven regularities. Little new appears, however, to be added to this type of phenomenon in Paragraph 9, except that Weber here focuses on the *interaction* between two market actors that is typically brief.

But Weber also expands his use of the concept of interest in Paragraph 9 in an important way. He does this when it comes to rational and interest-driven actions that form into something of a permanent nature that Weber terms a *Verein* and which may simply be translated as an organization. These organizations can be value-rational, as sects tend to be, or instrumentally rational, as firms tend to be; and it seems clear that the latter are far more common and also far more important in contemporary society.

Weber’s terminology when it comes to organizations is notoriously complex, and at this point it deserves to be pointed out also that political organizations may be formed in order to further ordinary interests, including of course the state. Weber draws a sharp conceptual distinction between relationships that are inspired by economic interests and are (formally) *voluntary*, on the one hand, and relationships that are the result of domination, power, and violence, and are ruled by *authority*, on the other. But this, to repeat, should not detract us from realizing that not only economic organizations but also many other types of organizations are based on interests, and – more generally – from arriving at the conclusion that interest-driven behavior is central to most organizations in modern society.

Economy and Society # 3: Interest in the concepts of class and status

Weber also suggests that the concept of interest can play an important role in another sociological category, namely that of *class*. Weber’s theoretical writings on class are primarily to be found in chapter 4 in

Economy and Society and in a chapter in the “old” part of this work, that is, in the part that was to be discarded after it had been rewritten and slimmed down.⁵³ Because Weber died before he could carry out his plans in this respect, however, both the section that he rewrote for chapter 4, and the old version were included in what we today know as *Economy and Society*.

While the concept of interest is present in the discussion of class in chapter 4, it is much more frequently used (and also easier to study) in the discussion of class in the “old” chapter in *Economy and Society*; and I will therefore primarily refer to the latter text. That Weber did not use the concept of interest very much in chapter 4 should not be understood to mean that he had now come to think that it was not as helpful as he had once thought. Its absence is more likely due to the fact that although Weber often used the idea of interest, he did not necessarily always use this word.

According to Weber, the modern concept of class rests exclusively on economic interest. “The factor that creates ‘class,’” we read in *Economy and Society*, “is unambiguously economic interest, and indeed, only interests involved in the existence of the market.”⁵⁴ As opposed to Marx, however, Weber sees class more as a factor that decides the socio-economic fate of the individual than as a collective actor of its own. What class an individual belongs to in a market economy will decide his or her “life chances,” as Weber famously phrased it.

Weber also discusses Marx’s concept of class interest; and his basic stance is that this concept becomes “ambiguous” as soon as you go beyond the general statement that a huge number of people who share the same economic interests are likely to behave in a similar way.⁵⁵ On the other hand, there do exist several factors that may channel interest-driven behavior of the individual member of a class in different “directions” (*Richtungen*).⁵⁶ One of these is the skill of the individual worker: whether he or she has a lot of talent for the task in question, just average talent, or no talent at all.⁵⁷ Another factor that may determine the “direction” of the interest-driven action has to do with the extent to which collective social action is available to the actor – whether it is to some extent, to a large extent, and also if organizations such as trade unions are present.

Before leaving the discussion of interest and Weber’s concept of class, it should be noted that Weber famously contrasts the concept of class

to that of status. While the former is decided by economic interest and production, the latter has to do with honor, life-style, and consumption. Just as there is “class society,” there also is “status society.”⁵⁸ If we look at the important chapter 4 entitled “Status Groups and Classes,” however, we also note that Weber only uses the concept of interest in his discussion of class, not in his discussion of status. But this should not be seen as a sign that interests are somehow less important in a status society than in a class society. It is perfectly clear from Weber’s analysis elsewhere in *Economy and Society* that people fight just as hard for their interests in a status society as in a class society. Weber also uses the expression “status interests” (*ständische Interessen*) at one point in his work.⁵⁹ We are again encountering a case, in other words, in which Weber uses other words for interest, and where the absence of the term “interest” should not be read as the absence of the idea of interest.

In the next section we shall turn to Weber’s famous discussion of “material and ideal interests,” and a status society can perhaps best be described as a type of society that rests on a different combination of interests than a class society. As opposed to a class society, the economic interests in a status society are not centered on the market, but around the processes of what Karl Polanyi terms redistribution and reciprocity. Ideal interests also play much more of a role in a status society since honor and lifestyle are central.

Ideas as switchmen for interest-driven action

When Weber in 1919–1920 revised the text that was to serve as the introduction to *The Economic Ethics of the World Religions*, he added the following passage that has become classic:

Not ideas, but material and ideal interests (*Interessen*), directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamic of interest.⁶⁰

This passage is among the most cited and discussed in the secondary literature on Weber, and it raises a topic that has not yet been discussed, namely the relationship of interests to ideas. Its main emphasis is on what you may call the double relationship of ideas to interests. First of all, ideas are *not* what primarily drives or motivates human beings – interests are. Second, *some* ideas may orient people’s actions in different directions. Weber’s metaphor can be rewritten as follows: human

actions are collectively propelled forward by interests, like a train at full speed – but in a direction that the switchmen decide.

Weber's quote on the switchmen is also important for its formulation "ideal and material interests." This is a happy formulation in that it draws attention to the fact that there exists no inherent contradiction between ideals and (economic) interests; both can operate as powerful forces on human behavior. It would also seem clear that in some cases ideal interests – as expressed in, say, certain types of political or religious actions – can be much stronger than economic interests. It is easy enough to find occasions in history when people have chosen to die for their religious or political ideals, but no one has yet heard of economic martyrs.

Although the quote about the switchmen is often discussed in the secondary literature on Weber, and the expression "material and ideal interests" is often commented on in this type of work, there is little discussion of the fact that Weber also uses this expression in many other parts of his work. One of Weber's earliest insights as a researcher was that even though it was in the economic interest of poor agricultural workers to remain on the huge landed estates in Germany, east of the river Elbe, they nonetheless preferred to immigrate to the cities where the economic prospects were considerably worse. What drove them to go counter to their economic interest, Weber says, was "the *magic* of freedom."⁶¹

In quite a few places in *Economy and Society* Weber also uses the exact expression "material and ideal interests" or expressions that are very close to it.⁶² In all of these places Weber appears to regard these two types of interest as summarizing the main forces that drive human behavior. They are not, however, the only forces that do so, as the famous switchmen quote reminds us of; also ideas (here in the form of religion) must be taken into account.

What this leaves us with is that Weber seems to suggest that the concept of interest can be used in sociology in two different ways. On the one hand, it can be used to construct specific and middle-range sociological concepts, such as "class" and "associative relationships." On the other hand, it can also be used as a shorthand to indicate the main forces that drive people's behavior. While the second use is typically open to the charge of tautology, Weber avoids this to some extent by assigning a decisive role to other factors, summarized as "ideas" and

which perhaps not only cover religion but also other ways of viewing the world. Weber's "ideas" not only have the power to steer behavior in different directions; they can also at certain junctures make human behavior *change* direction.

Bourdieu

The second major sociologist who has been an advocate of using the concept of interest in a precise and delimited way is Pierre Bourdieu. There exists a link between Weber's use of the concept of interest and that of Bourdieu. More precisely, Bourdieu early on studied Weber's sociology of religion and was especially influenced by his analysis of religious interests.⁶³ Weber's way of handling interest, as Bourdieu saw it, represented a very effective way to counter idealism in sociology as well as attempt to explain social facts with the help of psychological concepts such as motive and impulse.

Bourdieu's main writings on interest consist of two brief articles, "The Interest of the Sociologist" and "Is A Disinterested Act Possible?"⁶⁴ Especially the latter is rich and original, very similar in argument but also sharper in its formulations than the section on interest in the popular introduction to Bourdieu's ideas, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*.⁶⁵ For Bourdieu's ideas on religious interest and his link to Weber, the reader is referred to "Legitimation and Structured Interests in Weber's Sociology of Religion."⁶⁶

The concept of interest always appears in Bourdieu's sociology in close connection to a discussion of habitus and the field. Together these three concepts, plus the notion of different capitals, constitute the core of Bourdieu's sociology and the grid that he applies to most topics. The key idea is that certain areas of society constitute distinct social spaces with their own fundamental laws; that the actors in these fields all have a distinct disposition or habitus, based on earlier experience; and that they only participate in a field, if they have an interest in it. Each field has its own distinct interest; and there are consequently as many interests as there are fields. As examples of fields, Bourdieu mentions religion, the economy and the literary world. Similarly there are religious interests, economic interests, literary interests, and so on.

Bourdieu is careful to distinguish the way that he himself uses the concept of interest from the way that it is used in economics. The way that the economists handle interest, he warns, entails "the degree zero of

sociology”; he also refers to *homo economicus* as a kind of “anthropological monstrosity.”⁶⁷ There are several reasons why the economists’ use of the concept should be avoided, according to Bourdieu. For one, economists only see one type of interest, while in reality there are many. The tendency of economists to apply their own model of economic interest to all other areas of society, Bourdieu terms “economism.”⁶⁸ Economists, finally, are wrong in making the assumption that actors focus on their interests in a deliberate manner, decide how to realize them, and then do so. The way Bourdieu sees it, people approach reality through their habitus, which means that they approach it in an instinctive rather than in a conscious manner. People, Bourdieu says, act in a reasonable manner, not in a rational manner.

Bourdieu’s definition of interest is original and differs not only from the way that other sociologists have conceptualized it but also from earlier thinkers. Interest, Bourdieu suggests, is close to the terms *illusio*, *investment*, and *libido*. A field can be described as a “social game,” and only those actors who get drawn into the game and want to be part of it will display an interest in it. The opposite of interest is indifference or what Bourdieu, with the Stoics, terms *ataraxia*. In this case you do not see the point of the game; it simply leaves you cold.

As is clear from what just has been said, the main thrust of Bourdieu’s thought is that interests constitute social constructions. “Anthropology and comparative history show that the properly social magic of institutions can constitute just about anything as an interest.”⁶⁹ Whether Bourdieu’s stance also means that *all* interests are social constructions and are nothing else is not equally clear. At one point in his discussion of interest Bourdieu says that “biological libido” can be characterized as “an undifferentiated impulse” and always turns into “social libido,” and at another that it only makes sense to use the term “religious need” if the need is particularized and anchored in social relations.⁷⁰

Another creative contribution by Bourdieu to the sociological analysis of interest has to do with his ideas about disinterestedness. According to Bourdieu, being disinterested is not the same as being indifferent to a game. Being disinterested means that you have an investment in the social game but that this investment makes you *appear* indifferent to those who are outside the field. A religious person may show utter indifference to money, just as a nobleman or an artist. What matters to

the believer is her relationship to God; to the nobleman, honor; and to the artist, art.

According to Bourdieu, however, showing disinterest by the believer and so on is in reality simply how you have to behave when you pursue an interest in the specific field you are in. Bourdieu writes in “Is There A Disinterested Act?”:

At the beginning of *The Court Society*, Norbert Elias cites the example of a duke who gives a purse full of crowns to his son. When he questions him six months later and the son boasts of not having spent the money, the duke takes the purse and throws it out the window. He thus gives his son a lesson of disinterestedness, gratuitousness, and nobility; but it is also a lesson of investment of symbolic capital, which suits the aristocratic universe.⁷¹

Approach # 3: Interest as being of little or no importance

While it is rare to find direct attacks on the concept of interest in sociological works, this concept is nonetheless often *de facto* missing from the analysis and by implication regarded as of little or no importance. Part of this neglect probably has to do with the strength of economics and the tendency in this discipline to equate interest exclusively with economic (and non-social) self-interest. Sociologists, by tradition, do not like greed and economists. There is also a distinct tendency in modern sociology to see itself as capable of explaining everything that goes on in society through concepts such as social relations, social structure, networks and so on – that is, without referring to interests. One example of this is so-called relational sociology but there are others as well.⁷²

One of the best-known attacks on the concept of interest in modern sociology can be found in the work of Talcott Parsons, especially in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). The main argument in this famous work is that sociology has been increasingly successful in breaking with the utilitarian tradition of seeing interests as the key to social science analysis, and that this is a development that is extremely important and must be continued. Parsons states that Hobbes realized that if everybody followed their self-interest, there would be a war of all against all; and that this is the reason why there has to be a sovereign.

Many other thinkers, however, have instead followed a practice initiated by Locke, according to Parsons, which is to assume that people will realize on their own that they must not fight with one another and

that this is the reason why there is no war of all against all. This type of solution to the problem of order depends, again according to Parsons, on the assumption of a "natural identity of interests."⁷³ What Locke's solution misses, however, is the one element that is imperative to ensure order in society, and this is *norms*. According to Parsons, norms constitute "the ultimate source of power," while interest is "a brittle thing."⁷⁴

A similar hostility to the notion of interest can be found in the work of John Meyer, a major figure in contemporary sociology. In a well-known article entitled "Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony," one can find an argument that is centered on a very special view of interests.⁷⁵ Modern organizations, it is here suggested, exist in a world in which there is a very high premium on taking interests into account in a rational manner; and if this is not done, the survival of the organization will be in jeopardy. This ideology of interest and rationality, however, is so out of touch with reality that the only way for an organization to survive, if it adopts it, is to decouple its formal structure from its everyday practices. Organizations, in short, must appear to do one thing ("rational") but in reality do something else.

It has been pointed out by Paul DiMaggio that Meyer and his school primarily focus on "interest-free models and explanations," and that this may have its origin in Meyer's attempt to respond to the strong revival of utilitarianism that followed on the decline of Parsonsianism.⁷⁶ What is positive about Meyer's project, DiMaggio continues, is that it has succeeded in locating and drawing attention to precisely those factors that prevent people from recognizing their interests. But DiMaggio also argues that if one proceeds in this way, there is only a limited number of topics to which Meyer's type of analysis can be applied. Precisely for this reason new institutionalism should pay more attention to topics such as agency as well as interest.

In his more recent work, however, Meyer has chosen to do exactly the opposite of what DiMaggio recommends, with the result that interest has totally vanished from his analysis. Meyer's argument today is that the concepts of interest and of the individual are not very helpful in social science analysis; indeed, they obstruct it. To get at the core of things, Meyer argues, it is imperative to go beyond these two categories and realize that they are part of a very special type of Western culture, namely the liberalism of Anglo-American origins that has

become popular after World War II. “The liberal model legitimates an actor (a self or an interest) as an abstract, rather contentless, entity in space.”⁷⁷ Meyer also says that by making the assumption that there are individual actors, with distinct interests, turns these actors into “small gods” in the analysis.⁷⁸

Concluding remarks

The discussion in this article of the works of Ratzenhofer and others shows that there has been little continuity over time in the sociological literature when it comes to interest, in the sense that sociologists have not been aware of the way in which other sociologists have used this concept. This represents a problem in its own right; it also constitutes a reason for grouping the various sociologists into the three categories of this article and going through their arguments in detail.

The first strategy – to see interest as *the* major force in social life – can be faulted on the ground of tautology, since there are no other factors that drive behavior. Or to phrase it differently: by assuming that everything that happens is the result of one or several interests you simply recast the whole thing in terms of interests. One is reminded of the famous line in one of Molière’s comedies in which a doctor explains that opium puts people to sleep because it has “sleep-inducing powers (*virtus dormitiva*).”⁷⁹

Several of the sociologists who have been in favor of seeing interest as *the* major cause of what happens in social life have also failed to draw a proper line between the realms of biology and psychology, on the one hand, and that of the social, on the other. Ratzenhofer, Small, and Ross are all guilty on this count. One of the important drawbacks of this approach is that it easily leads to a position where one and the same cause (in the psychological-biological realm) is used to account for a number of different phenomena (in the social realm).

Nonetheless, the advocates of seeing interest as the major force in social life have also produced some fruitful ideas that deserve to be part of the discussion. For one thing, someone like Ross tried to associate the concept of interest with that of “social forces,” which is a good idea, because interest implies power and strength in society. Simmel, in contrast, suggested that all social forms that exist were the result of interests – but in the process eliminated all references to the force

or strength that characterize interest-driven social behavior. Finally, although the writings of Ratzenhofer, Small, and Ross may seem dated today, it is different with the works of Bentley and Coleman, which are still sharp and worth reading.

The second strategy – to assign a major role to interest in the sociological explanation, but together with other factors – avoids the danger of tautology. That it is also possible to treat interest as one among several factors in very different ways was illustrated by the work of Weber and Bourdieu. Weber's main strategy was to center sociological concepts directly around interest (e.g., "uniform behavior determined by self-interest") or let it be an integral part of them (e.g., "class" and "associative relationships"). By proceeding in this manner, Weber succeeded in creating several useful sociological concepts. Still, Weber's treatment of interest is not wholly satisfactory. He, for example, never explains what he means by interest and proceeds as if its meaning is obvious. Weber also uses this concept in very different ways – as one of several factors in middle-range concepts, but also as *the* major driving forces in society, as in the expression "material and ideal interests."

Bourdieu's way of handling interest is quite different from that of Weber, in the sense that he makes it an organic part of his own general theory of sociology. Bourdieu, in other words, positions the concept of interest at a level where it can only be used by sociologists who also accept his ideas about field, habitus, and so on. Furthermore, while the idea that every field has its own interest may at first seem useful, there is little theoretical discussion in Bourdieu's work about what happens when the interests of all fields collide.

As opposed to Weber, however, Bourdieu does provide an explanation of what interest is, and he does this in an imaginative and original way. Bourdieu also spells out explicitly an idea that is only implicit in Weber, namely that interests may be conceptualized as social constructions. The links of interest to the biological and psychological realms are in other words severed in Bourdieu's work, and the scene is set for a purely sociological analysis of interest along the lines of Durkheim's dictum that only social facts should be used to explain other social facts.

Finally, the third strategy – to view interests as being of little or no importance – risks reducing everything that happens in social life to culture, values, norms, and the like. It is probably no accident that Talcott Parsons and John Meyer, who are both social systems thinkers

and reject methodological individualism, are hostile to using the notion of interest in sociological explanations; and the reason for this is as follows. Thinkers who start with the individual must face the problem of explaining how an individual can survive, and this usually leads to a discussion of work, interest, or the like. Systems theoreticians and holists, in contrast, do not find it equally urgent to address this question, because a system is an abstract entity and easily lends itself to an analysis exclusively in terms of symbols, culture, and the like.

It should also be noted that both Parsons and Meyer are somewhat ambivalent in their attitude to interest in that they simultaneously appear to reject it and approve of it. Parsons, for example, praises Weber for his use of the concept of religious interest in *The Structure of Social Action* but also criticizes the general concept of interest in the same work; and Meyer argues that the formal organization is often a “rational myth,” while he simultaneously says that it is “efficiency criteria” (read: interest) that drive the informal organization. The key to their ambivalence may be that they follow the economists in equating interest with economic interest.

Although the sociologists discussed in this article have proposed several different ways in which the concept of interest can be incorporated into sociological analysis, they have by no means solved all the problems involved in this enterprise. Neither have they succeeded in establishing interest as a standard sociological concept. What would a modern definition of interest look like? How can it be used in empirical research and be operationalized? These are some of the questions that need to be addressed if we are to have a useful *sociological* concept of interest.

Notes

1. I am thankful for the comments from two anonymous reviewers at *Theory and Society*.
2. For works in English on the history of the concept of interest, see especially Albert O. Hirschman, “The Concept of Interest: From Euphemism to Tautology,” in *Rival Views of Market Society* (New York: Viking, 1986), 35–55; and Stephen Holmes, “The Secret History of Self-Interest,” in Jane Mansbridge, editor, *Beyond Self-Interest* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 267–286; see also Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977); and Pierre Demeulenaere, “Interest, Sociological Analysis of,” in Vol. 11 of Neil Smelser and Paul Baltes, editors, *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001), 7715–7718. For non-English works, see especially Beat Huber, *Der Begriff des Interesses in den Sozialwissenschaften* (Winterthur:

- Verlag P.G. Keller, 1958); and E.W. Orth et al., "Interesse," in Vol. 3 in Otto Brunner et al., editors *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1982), 305–365. See also Johan Heilbron, "French Moralists and the Anthropology of the Modern Era: On the Genesis of the Notions of 'Interest' and 'Commercial Society,'" in Johan Heilbron et al., editors, *The Rise of the Social Sciences and the Formation of Modernity* (Amsterdam: Kluwer, 1998), 77–106; and Harmut Neuendorf, *Der Begriff des Interesses. Eine Studie zu den Gesellschaftstheorien von Hobbes, Smith und Marx* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973).
3. Robert K. Merton, "Socially Expected Duration: A Case Study of Concept Formation in Sociology," in Walter W. Powell and Richard Robbins, editors, *Conflict and Consensus* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 267.
 4. For an elaboration of this theme, see my forthcoming *Interest* (London: Open University Press).
 5. Albion Small, *General Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1905), p. 434; similarly Floyd House, "The Concept of 'Social Forces' in American Sociology. Section V. The 'Interest' Concept," *American Journal of Sociology* 31(1926): 508.
 6. E.A. Ross, *Foundations of Sociology* (New York: Macmillan, 1905).
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 8. Huber, *Begriff des Interesses*, 6
 9. Gustav Ratzenhofer, *Die Philosophische Erkenntnis. Positive Philosophie des sozialen Lebens* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1898).
 10. *Ibid.*, 54–66.
 11. Pitirim Sorokin, *Contemporary Sociological Theories* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), 643.
 12. Small, *General Sociology*, 442.
 13. *Ibid.*, 96.
 14. *Ibid.*, 426.
 15. *Ibid.*, 426–427.
 16. *Ibid.*, 430.
 17. *Ibid.*, 433
 18. *Ibid.*, 197.
 19. *Ibid.*, 199.
 20. *Ibid.*, 438–439.
 21. Ross, *Foundations*, 170.
 22. *Ibid.*, 169.
 23. *Ibid.*, 168.
 24. Cf. Robert M. MacIver, "Interests," in Vol. 7 of E.R.A. Seligman and Alvin Johnson, editors, *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1932), 146.
 25. Bentley, *ibid.*, 26–37.
 26. *Ibid.*, 36–37.
 27. *Ibid.*, 211.
 28. *Ibid.*, 213.
 29. *Ibid.*, 219, 318.
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37. James Coleman, "Introducing Social Structure into Economic Analysis," *American Economic Review* 74/2(1984): 84–88.
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49. *Ibid.*, 31–38.
50. *Ibid.*, 40–43.
51. *Ibid.*, 297–299.
52. *Ibid.*, 41.
53. *Ibid.*, 302–307, 926–939.
54. *Ibid.*, 928.
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60. Max Weber, *From Max Weber* (New York: Oxford University Press, [1920] 1946), 280.
61. Max Weber, *Political Writings* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 8.
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64. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Interest of the Sociologist," 87–93, in *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, [1981] 1990); "Is a Disinterested Act Possible?" in *Practical Reason* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, [1988] 1998), 75–91.
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68. Bourdieu, "The Interest of the Sociologist," 83.
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70. Bourdieu, "Legitimation and Structured Interests," 22; "Is a Disinterested Act Possible?" 78.
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