
What is the content of human nature and why is human nature important for sociology? These are the questions that inspire the opening (and only new) chapter in this book of selected articles by Milton Gordon. Other chapters in this collection include selections from Gordon’s earlier books SOCIAL CLASS IN AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY (1958) and ASSIMILATION IN AMERICAN LIFE: The Role of Race, Religion, and National Origins (1964) plus other articles published from 1941 to 1975. With many of these older articles difficult to locate in the fugitive literature, the present book is a useful collection of a thoughtful and insightful sociologist’s scholarly products. It should be noted that both SOCIAL CLASS IN AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY and ASSIMILATION IN AMERICAN LIFE are still in print in
inexpensive paperback editions. The former is an excellent review of the stratification literature as of the 1950s, and the latter is a classic exposition of the multidimensional nature of the concept of assimilation.

Because of the original appearance of the lead essay on "Human Nature and Sociology," I will concentrate the balance of my remarks on it. Gordon begins with a review of the implicit theory of human nature represented in the major sociologists of the 19th and 20th centuries. In general, Gordon concludes that most all sociologists, whether macro or micro in their orientation, have assumed that human nature is a social product, almost entirely influenced by the prevailing social organization through the processes of social interaction and socialization. With the decline of pseudo-scientific beliefs of racial differences, social scientists have avoided any discussion of biological predispositions for social behavior. Gordon notes, with approval, the recent interest in the biological bases of human nature by sociologists such as Gerhard Lenuki and Pierre van den Berghe (Gordon does not mention the recent work of sociobiologists on this topic). This "new school" of human nature avoids the racist tendencies of earlier work by assuming a common biological heritage in all societies and races. In order to discover what is "human nature," Gordon first turns to the discipline of psychology, but concludes that there is little scientific consensus among experts in that field. So from introspection and observation, Gordon suggests a theory or perspective of human nature as it affects human behavior. The salient factors that Gordon identifies are: (1) physiological needs, (2) capacities for emotional or effective expression, (3) cognitive capacities, and (4) overarching drive motivations. These basic factors are then illustrated and amplified in the balance of the chapter.

Gordon is an accomplished and serious writer who forces the reader to consider ideas as carefully as the author does. Yet, I am unpersuaded that this renewed focus on human nature is really relevant for sociology. If biological predispositions (human nature) are constants in all societies and groups in a society, how can we explain variations in social organization or behavior between social groups. Recall from elementary statistics (or logic) that constants cannot explain differences. It may be that people murder other people because they are partially influenced by innate predispositions
of aggression, yet sociology should be directed towards an understanding of why societies have higher murder rates, and why some kinds of people are more likely to kill than others. Perhaps an inquiry into human nature will explain species differences, but it is unlikely to be useful in explaining societal or social differences.

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