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978-0-521-08293-8 - Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx,  
Durkheim and Max Weber

Anthony Giddens

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# Capitalism and modern social theory

*An analysis of the writings of  
Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber*

**ANTHONY GIDDENS**

*Professor of Sociology and Fellow of King's College, Cambridge*



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## Preface

Die Vernunft hat immer existiert, nur  
nicht immer in der vernünftigen Form

*Marx*

This book is written in the belief that there is a widespread feeling among sociologists that contemporary social theory stands in need of a radical revision. Such a revision must begin from a reconsideration of the works of those writers who established the principal frames of reference of modern sociology. In this connection, three names rank above all others: Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber. My objectives in this work are twofold: firstly, to set out a precise, yet comprehensive, analysis of the sociological ideas of each of these three authors; and secondly, to examine some of the main points of divergence between Marx's characteristic views on the one hand, and those of the two later writers on the other. I do not pretend to provide any sort of overall evaluation of the relationship between 'Marxist' and 'bourgeois' sociology, but I hope that this book may help to accomplish the preparatory task of clearing a way through the profuse tangle of assertions and counter-assertions which have surrounded the debate on this issue. I have, inevitably, covered a great deal of familiar ground. However, recent scholarship has illuminated basic aspects of the writings of all three authors, and I believe that my analysis departs considerably from some of the established works in the field.

I do not, of course, wish to argue that the writings of the authors discussed in this book represent the only significant streams of social thought which have become embodied into sociology. On the contrary, the most striking characteristic of social thought over the hundred years from 1820 to 1920 is the very plethora of diverse forms of theory which were developed over that period. The works of Marx's contemporaries, such as Tocqueville, Comte and Spencer, continue to have a definite relevance to the problems of modern sociology, and it would perhaps have been more logical to have included these authors as the subject of detailed discussion in this volume. I decided against this, partly from reasons of space, and partly because the influence of Marx today is so much greater than any of these writers (and rightly so, in terms of the more profound intellectual content of Marx's works). Moreover, most of the dominant branches of modern social theory can be traced, although with numerous intermediate modifications and extensions, to the three authors upon whom I have concentrated in this book. Marx's works, obviously, are the primary source of the various forms of contemporary neo-Marxism; Durkheim's writings may be identified as the dominant inspiration

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lying behind 'structural-functionalism'; and at least some of the modern variants of phenomenology derive, directly or indirectly, from the writings of Max Weber. Moreover, within more specific fields of sociology, such as in the study of social stratification, religion, and so on, the influence of Marx, Durkheim and Weber has been fundamental.

As Durkheim himself pointed out in a preface to a book on Kant by his friend and colleague Hamelin, anyone who wishes to portray the thought of men of a different time to his own, faces a certain dilemma. Either he preserves the original terminology in which the author couched his works, in which case he runs the risk that his exposition appears outdated, and hence irrelevant to modern times; or he consciously modernises his terms, and faces the danger that his analysis will be untrue to the ideas of the writer concerned. It says much for the contemporary relevance of the social thought of the three authors discussed in this book that, in analysing their work, this dilemma does not offer difficulties of an acute kind. Where there are problems of this sort, I have opted to preserve the original phraseology. But in the case of the writers whose works are analysed in this volume, the main difficulties which are posed concern the rendition of culturally specific German or French terms into English. Terms such as *Geist* or *représentation collective* have no satisfactory English equivalents, and themselves express some of the differences in social development between Britain, Germany and France which are touched upon in the book. I have attempted to meet such problems, as far as is possible, by paying attention to the particular shades of meaning contained in the original texts, and in making quotations I have frequently modified the existing English translations.

This is not a critical, but an expository and comparative work. By using the present tense wherever possible, I have tried to emphasise the *contemporary* relevance of these authors. I have not sought to identify the weaknesses or ambiguities in the works of Marx, Durkheim or Weber, but rather have attempted to demonstrate the internal coherence which can be discerned in the writings of each author. I have also avoided, as far as possible, the scholarly travail of identifying the sources of the ideas comprised in the writings of the three figures. But inevitably, because all three wrote in a polemical vein, reference to other authors and traditions of thought cannot be eschewed altogether. I have given some degree of prominence to the social and historical 'rooting' of the three writers whose work is analysed here, since this is essential to the adequate interpretation of their writings. In various ways, of course, the personalities of the three men present dramatic contrasts, and are also no doubt relevant to the explication of the social theories which they formulated. I have ignored this, because it is not my objective to analyse in any amount of detail the 'causal' origins of the writings examined in the book. My concern is directed at disentangling some of the complex intellectual relationships among the three.



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I have not attempted, in the concluding chapters, to compare the works of Durkheim and Weber directly, but instead have used Marx's writings as the point of reference. Assessment of the convergences and discrepancies between the writings of Marx on the one hand, and Durkheim and Weber on the other, is complicated by the fact of the retarded publication of Marx's early works. It is only relatively recently, since something like a decade after the death of Durkheim (1917) and Weber (1920), that it has become possible to assess the intellectual content of Marx's writings in the light of these works which, while they are of extreme importance to the evaluation of Marx's thought, were published for the first time almost a century after they were originally written. In my account of Marx's writings, I have tried to break away from the dichotomy between the works of the 'young' and the 'mature' Marx which has tyrannised most Marxist scholarship since the last war. Close scrutiny of the notes which Marx originally wrote as the basis of *Capital* in 1857–8 (*Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie*), leaves no doubt that Marx did not abandon the perspective which guided him in his early writings. But, in practice, those who have granted the truth of this, in analysing Marx's thought, have still tended to concentrate upon one part of Marx's writings to the exclusion of the other. I have attempted to provide a more balanced and integrated analysis, which preserves the basic place of *Capital* in Marx's life's work.

Apart from Marx himself, there can be few social thinkers whose fate it has been to be so persistently misunderstood as Durkheim. In his own day, Durkheim's theoretical writings were regarded by most critics as embodying an unacceptable metaphysical notion of the 'group mind'. More recent sympathetic accounts have largely dispelled this sort of misinterpretation, but have supplanted it with one which places virtually the whole emphasis upon Durkheim's functionalism. In this book, I have sought to rescue Durkheim as an historical thinker. Durkheim always emphasised the crucial significance of the historical dimension in sociology, and I believe that an appreciation of this leads to quite a different assessment of Durkheim's thought from that which is ordinarily given. Durkheim was *not* primarily concerned with 'the problem of order', but with the problem of 'the *changing* nature of order' in the context of a definite conception of social development.

Weber's writings are perhaps the most complex of those analysed in this book, and they defy easy treatment upon a general level. This fact has led, I think, to a failure in some secondary accounts to grasp the essential consistency in Weber's work. It is only an apparent paradox to say that the very *diversity* of Weber's contributions expresses the epistemological principles which unify them as a single corpus of writings. Weber's radical neo-Kantianism constitutes the underlying standpoint which combines his various essays in different fields within a coherent framework. It is this which, in certain important respects, creates irremediable divergences, some of which

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I have analysed in the concluding chapters, between Weber's social theory and that of both Durkheim and Marx.

One final point should perhaps be made. I believe that sociologists must always be conscious of the social context within which theories are formulated. But to stress this does not entail acceptance of a wholly relativistic position, according to which the 'validity' of a given conception is only limited to the circumstances which gave rise to it. The fortunes of Marx's writings bear witness to this. I have argued that Marx's theory was formulated at an early stage of capitalist development, and that the subsequent experience of the leading countries of western Europe helped to fashion a version of 'Marxism' which differed substantially from that originally framed by Marx. Every form of practical theory has its Saint Paul, and within certain limits this may be regarded as inevitable. But to admit this is not to accept the stock view that the subsequent development of capitalism has 'falsified' Marx. Marx's writings today still offer a conception of society and history which it is valuable to contrast with those of other, later, authors. I do not believe that these divergences can be settled in the conventional sense in which scientific theories are 'confirmed' or 'invalidated' by empirical test. But neither are they refractory to empirical reference in the sense in which philosophical theories are. If the borderline between sociology and social philosophy is difficult to draw, it exists nonetheless. It is mistaken, I am certain, for sociologists to seek to restrict the scope of their discipline to those areas in which the empirical testing of propositions is easily applied. This is the way to a sterile formalism in which sociology becomes *lebensfremd*, and thus irrelevant to the very issues to which the sociological perspective has most of all to contribute.

*Anthony Giddens*

*3 March 1971*

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## Introduction

In his inaugural lecture, delivered at Cambridge in 1895, Lord Acton expressed the conviction that there is ‘an evident and intelligible line’ which marks off the modern age in Europe from that which preceded it. The modern epoch did not succeed the mediaeval era ‘by normal succession, with outward tokens of legitimate descent’:

Unheralded, it founded a new order of things, under a law of innovation, sapping the ancient reign of continuity. In those days Columbus subverted the notions of the world, and reversed the conditions of production, wealth, and power; in those days Machiavelli released government from the restraint of law; Erasmus diverted the current of ancient learning from profane into Christian channels; Luther broke the chain of authority and tradition at the strongest link; and Copernicus erected an invincible power that set for ever the mark of progress upon the time that was to come... It was an awakening of new life; the world revolved in a different orbit, determined by influences unknown before.<sup>1</sup>

This shattering of the traditional order in Europe, Acton goes on to say, was the source of the development of historical science. Traditional society, by definition, continually looks back into the past, and the past is its present. But it is exactly because this is the case that there is no concern with ‘history’ as such; the continuity of yesterday and today minimises the clarity with which distinctions are drawn between what ‘was’ and what ‘is’. The existence of a science of history, therefore, presupposes a world in which change is ubiquitous, and, more especially, one in which the past has become, in some degree, a burden from which men seek to be freed. In the modern era, men no longer accept the conditions of life into which they are born as necessarily given for all time, but attempt to impose their will upon reality in order to bend the future into a shape which conforms to their desires.

If Renaissance Europe gave rise to a concern with history, it was industrial Europe which provided the conditions for the emergence of sociology. It could be said that the French Revolution of 1789 was the catalyst between these two enormously complex sets of events. Britain was, according to the usual measures, the first country to acquire some degree of democratic government; but, in spite of the fact that this was not obtained without political revolution, the process of social and economic change which transformed society in Britain from the seventeenth century onwards was relatively progressive in character. The Revolution in France, by contrast, dramatically set off the privileged, aristocratic order of the *ancien régime*

<sup>1</sup> Lord Acton: *Lectures on Modern History* (London, 1960), p. 19.

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against the vision of a new society which would realise general principles of justice and freedom. The Declaration of Human Rights, adopted in 1789, proposed that ‘ignorance, disregard or contempt of the rights of man is the sole cause of public misfortune’. Thus the French Revolution, or so it seemed, finally extended the secular rationalism of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into the sphere of human society itself. But the political changes instituted by the 1789 Revolution in fact both expressed and signalled the occurrence of a more deeply-rooted reorganisation of society, and in this Britain again assumed the leading role. The transition from agrarian, handicraft production to an industrial economy founded upon the factory and the machine was one which began in Britain towards the end of the eighteenth century. The full effects of these changes were felt in the nineteenth century, both in Britain and in the other major countries of western Europe.

It has often been pointed out, of course, that the conjunction of events linking the political climate of the French Revolution and the economic changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution provided the context from within which sociology was formed. It is necessary to remember, however, how divergent were the experiences of the various countries in western Europe from the late eighteenth century onwards, because it is in the framework of these differences that the main traditions of social thought were created in the nineteenth century. Sociologists today talk blandly of the emergence of ‘industrial society’ in nineteenth-century Europe, ignoring the complexities which this process involved.

For each of the three major countries of western Europe – Britain, France and Germany – the closing decades of the eighteenth century were years of advancing economic prosperity. The pace of economic development in Britain in the late eighteenth century far outstripped that of the others; and during these years a number of profound technological innovations effected a metamorphosis in the organisation of cotton manufacture and thereby initiated the rapid spread of mechanisation and factory production. But at the turn of the nineteenth century, only a relatively confined sector of the British economy had been directly affected by the Industrial Revolution. Even two decades later, the picture was little different, save that cotton – fifty years before of minor significance in the economy as a whole – had assumed the role of Britain’s leading manufacturing industry.<sup>2</sup> Not until the mid-point of the nineteenth century could Britain adequately be described as an ‘industrial society’. The situation in France and Germany was very different from this. It would be quite wrong to call these countries, as in the common parlance of today, ‘under-developed’.<sup>3</sup> In some respects, as for instance in standards of cultural achievement, especially in literature, art,

<sup>2</sup> Phyllis Deane and W. A. Cole: *British Economic Growth* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 182–92.

<sup>3</sup> cf. David S. Landes: *The Unbound Prometheus* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 125.

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and philosophy, both continental countries could lay claim to outstripping comparable British attainments. But, from the middle of the eighteenth century, each country clearly lagged behind Britain in its level of economic development, and it was not until well over a century later that either France or Germany succeeded in recapturing in substantial degree the lead which had been ceded to the former country.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, regarding Britain as the measure, neither Germany nor France in the early part of the nineteenth century could match the internal political stability of a state in which the liberal bourgeoisie had achieved a strong position in government. The Restoration in France gave material expression to the heavy retrenchment of reactionary interests which dispelled the extravagant progressive hopes that had guided the Jacobins twenty-five years earlier. The social and political cleavages which had been exposed by the Revolution were aggravated rather than resolved by the events of 1789 and their immediate aftermath; in fact, not until after 1870 did any regime in France manage to continue in power for more than two decades. Germany, as Marx noted early in his intellectual career, ‘shared in the restorations of modern nations without ever sharing in their revolutions’.<sup>5</sup> The country, in fact, was not a nation at all, in the modern sense, at the opening of the nineteenth century, but was composed of a loose aggregate of sovereign states; this situation was not remedied until, under Bismarck, Prussia was able to use her dominant position to secure the full political unification of Germany.

The problem of the ‘backwardness’ of Germany stands at the root of Marx’s early formulations of historical materialism. As a ‘Young Hegelian’ Marx initially shared the view that the rational criticism of existing institutions was sufficient to provoke the radical changes necessary to allow Germany to match, and to overtake, the two other leading western European countries. But, as Marx soon perceived, this radical—critical posture merely preserved the typical German concern with ‘theory’ to the exclusion of ‘practice’. ‘In politics’, Marx wrote, ‘the Germans have *thought* what other nations have *done*.’<sup>6</sup> Hegel’s system represented the most perfect philosophical example of this, transforming the whole of human history into the history of the mind or spirit. If Germany was to advance further, Marx concluded, philosophical criticism would have to be complemented by knowledge of the material forces which are always at work in change which does not remain merely on the level of ideas.

Many writers have laid great stress, quite correctly, upon the threefold

<sup>4</sup> Differences in level of economic advancement between Britain and the other two countries can, of course, be traced back well beyond the eighteenth century. cf., for example, F. Cronzet: ‘England and France in the eighteenth century: a comparative analysis of two economic growths’, in R. M. Hartwell: *The Causes of the Industrial Revolution in England* (London, 1967), pp. 139–74.

<sup>5</sup> *EW*, p. 45.

<sup>6</sup> *EW*, p. 51.

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set of influences which were combined in Marx's writings.<sup>7</sup> Marx effected a powerful synthesis of the streams of thought which had developed in conjunction with the social, economic and political differences between the three leading western European countries. Political economy, closely interconnected with the philosophy of utilitarianism, remained effectively the only significant form of social theory in Britain throughout most of the nineteenth century. Marx accepted several of the key propositions developed by Adam Smith and Ricardo, but merged them with certain of the perspectives upon the finite character of bourgeois society contained in the various currents of French socialism. The latter were the proximate source of the society of the future first envisaged by Marx in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, written in Paris. The historical dimension integrating political economy and socialism was provided by the Hegelian dialectic. In this way, Marx's works reunited, in a coherent fashion, the intellectual consciousness of the diverse experience of Britain, France and Germany, and yet at the same time offered a basis for the theoretical interpretation of these differences in social, economic, and political structure.

When Marx died, in 1883, Durkheim and Weber were young men standing at the threshold of their academic careers. But already by this date, the social structures of all of the three major countries of western Europe had changed considerably from the time at which Marx had developed his basic views. In both France and Germany – in contrast to Britain – working-class movements of a potentially revolutionary nature came to play a leading role in the political system. However, the influence of these movements was counterbalanced by a growing surge of nationalism: and, especially in Germany, which did not experience a successful bourgeois revolution, the bourgeoisie was kept subordinate to a powerful autocratic order, operating through control of the state bureaucracy, the army, and the established hierarchy. Inside Germany, in spite of the anti-socialist laws, the Social Democratic Party – an explicitly 'Marxist' party after 1875 – swelled in size, but towards the end of the century found its revolutionary posture increasingly out of alignment with its real position in a society which had largely become transformed into an industrial society 'from the top'.

It was in this context, beginning shortly before Marx's death, that Engels began to publish a set of writings furnishing a defence and an exposition of Marxism as a systematic doctrine – the most important and influential of these being *Anti-Dühring*. In emphasising the 'scientific' character of Marxist socialism as against utopian and voluntarist forms of socialist theory, *Anti-Dühring* prepared the ground for the positivistic interpretation of Marxism which ruled in Marxist circles until after the First World War, and

<sup>7</sup> cf. Lenin: 'The three sources and three component parts of Marxism', *V. I. Lenin, Selected Works* (London, 1969), pp. 20–32.

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which has become the official philosophy in the Soviet Union.<sup>8</sup> The decade following Marx's death – that is, the time at which both Durkheim and Weber were each consolidating the views which informed their life's work – was the crucial period during which Marxism became a really important force, both politically and intellectually. The philosophical materialism that, under the influence of Engels, came to be universally identified as 'Marxism', offered a theoretical framework for Social Democracy which allowed a substantial divergence between theory and practice: the Social Democrats became more and more a reformist party in substance, while remaining a revolutionary party in name. But by this very token, their leading spokesmen failed to appreciate the significance of the changes which had made it possible to rapidly cut back the lead in industrialisation which Britain had previously enjoyed.

The problem of the influence of 'ideas' in social development, which so dominated the polemical interchanges between Marxists and their critics at around the turn of the present century, has to be understood against this backdrop. Both Durkheim and Weber accepted the philosophical materialism disseminated by Engels, Kautsky, Labriola, and others as the object of their critical evaluations of the claims of Marxism. Liberals and Marxists alike thus structured their debate around the classical dichotomy between idealism and materialism. The controversy over the validity of Marx's writings, then, became concerned primarily with the question of whether or not ideas are mere 'epiphenomena' which have no 'independent' part to play in social development. One of my concerns in this book is to demonstrate the essential irrelevance of this debate, in so far as Marx's writings may be compared with those of Durkheim and Weber as contrasting forms of social theory. Marx, no less than the latter two writers, sought to break through the traditional philosophical division between idealism and materialism, and it is the confusion between this time-honoured dichotomy and Marx's own 'materialistic' critique of idealism which has obscured the sources of the real divergences between Marx and 'academic' or 'bourgeois' sociology.

This is a matter which has only fairly recently become apparent, in the course of the tremendous revival of western Marxist scholarship since the last World War. The appearance, in Rjazanov's *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe*, of various previously unpublished writings of Marx and Engels, has, of course, played a major role in stimulating this revival. The publication of such works as the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, however, has given rise to as many new interpretative problems as it has helped to resolve. These concern both the 'internal' nature and coherence of Marx's own writings, and the intellectual connections between Marx's theoretical position and that of other social thinkers. The intricate difficulties which are posed by this

<sup>8</sup> George Lichtheim: *Marxism, an Historical and Critical Study* (London, 1964), pp. 238–43.

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situation have largely dictated the structure of this book. In evaluating some of the sources of the contemporary debate between Marxism and ‘academic’ sociology it seemed necessary, as a prior task, to reconstruct the principal themes in the writings of the major thinkers whose works are at the origins of modern social theory. The first two-thirds of the book, therefore, are taken up with separate treatments of the forms of social theory established by Marx, Durkheim and Weber respectively (Chapters 1–12). The need to formulate, in as precise and coherent a manner, the leading themes in the writings of each author has precluded any attempt at the critical analysis of either the ‘logic’ or the factual ‘validity’ of their thought.

The first of the three concluding chapters (Chapter 13) sets out an analysis of the principal ways in which Durkheim and Weber themselves sought to separate their views from those they attributed to Marx. But these views cannot simply be accepted at their ‘face value’. Chapters 14 and 15 abstract from the stated positions of Durkheim and Weber in this respect, and provide a new assessment of some of the main parallels and divergencies between their writings and those of Marx. It should also be stressed that there are several important lines of comparison between Marx, Durkheim and Weber which have been neglected, or ignored altogether, in the three concluding chapters. The most obvious omission here concerns the question of the divergent methodological views espoused by the three writers: *prima facie*, the most basic comparative issues might seem to lie here. In some senses this is indeed the case; but it is a basic contention of this book that the overwhelming interest of each of these authors was in the delineation of the characteristic structure of modern ‘capitalism’ as contrasted with prior forms of society. The typical emphasis in sociology over the past few decades has been directed towards the search for a formal ‘general theory’. Laudable as such an objective may be, it diverges from the main focus of the works of the men who established the foundations of modern social thought, and has had important consequences in obscuring the significance of problems which they placed at the forefront of social theory. I do not believe that any of the three authors discussed in this book sought to create all-embracing ‘systems’ of thought in the sense in which such an intention is ordinarily attributed to them: indeed, each categorically denied this. Thus while I have accentuated the integral unity of the works of each writer, I have at the same time endeavoured to convey the partial and incomplete character which each stressed as qualifying the perspectives which he established and the conclusions which he reached.



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## List of abbreviations used

Abbreviations, as listed below, have been used for titles which are frequently cited in the references. The particular editions of these works which have been employed are given in the bibliography, at the end of the book. Where a double reference is given, this indicates that a quotation in the text is my own translation, or that I have in some way amended the existing English translation. The first reference always relates to the English edition, the second to the original.

### Works by Marx and Engels

<i>Cap</i>	<i>Capital</i>
<i>CM</i>	<i>The Communist Manifesto</i>
<i>EW</i>	<i>Karl Marx, Early Writings</i>
<i>GI</i>	<i>The German Ideology</i>
<i>Gru</i>	<i>Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie</i>
<i>SW</i>	<i>Selected Works</i>
<i>We</i>	<i>Werke</i>
<i>WYM</i>	<i>Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society</i>

### Works by Durkheim

<i>DL</i>	<i>The Division of Labour in Society</i>
<i>DTS</i>	<i>De la division du travail social</i>
<i>EF</i>	<i>The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life</i>
<i>FE</i>	<i>Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse</i>
<i>PECM</i>	<i>Professional Ethics and Civic Morals</i>
<i>RMS</i>	<i>Les règles de la méthode sociologique</i>
<i>RSM</i>	<i>The Rules of Sociological Method</i>
<i>Soc</i>	<i>Socialism</i>
<i>Su</i>	<i>Suicide</i>
<i>LS</i>	<i>Le Suicide</i>

### Journals

<i>AS</i>	<i>Année sociologique</i>
<i>RP</i>	<i>Revue philosophique</i>

### Works by Max Weber

<i>ES</i>	<i>Economy and Society</i>
<i>FMW</i>	<i>From Max Weber : Essays in Sociology</i>
<i>GAR</i>	<i>Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie</i>
<i>GASS</i>	<i>Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Soziologie und Sozialpolitik</i>
<i>GAW</i>	<i>Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre</i>
<i>GPS</i>	<i>Gesammelte politische Schriften</i>
<i>MSS</i>	<i>Methodology of the Social Sciences</i>
<i>PE</i>	<i>The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism</i>
<i>RC</i>	<i>The Religion of China</i>
<i>RI</i>	<i>Religion of India</i>
<i>WuG</i>	<i>Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft</i>

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Durkheim and Max Weber

Anthony Giddens

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*For M. C. G.*